

January/  
February  
2000

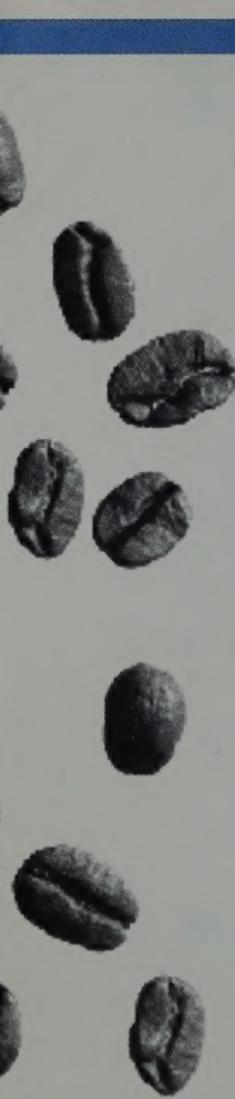
# LUTHERAN WOMAN TODAY

LEVEL  
ONE

PROCESSED  
DEC 14 1999  
GTU LIBRARY

EPIPHANY, SEASON OF LIGHT

# A coffee high



At the Women of the ELCA Fourth Triennial Convention this past July, Erbin Crowell and I worked alongside staff of Lutheran World Relief in support of the Lutheran World Relief Coffee Project.

The response of those we met mirrored the excitement and enthusiasm with which the LWR Coffee Project has been greeted over the past two years. We were struck by the friendliness of everyone who stopped by to welcome us and to sample a cup of fairly traded coffee. Whether they were hearing about the project for the first time or were long-time participants, it was obvious that there was great interest in the lives of small-scale coffee farmers, their families, and the impact fair trade can have upon coffee-farming communities. Clearly, the women we met were seeking to put into practice the theme of the convention, "Live God's Justice."

And we were reminded that Lutherans do indeed love their coffee: we served somewhere in the neighborhood of 1500 cups of Fellowship Blend and the new Fellowship Blend Decaf during the convention. At the same time, the staff from Augsburg Fortress, who were selling LWR Coffee Project coffee and tea, were having a difficult time keeping the display tables full.

Response to and participation in the project continues to be inspiring. To date, more than 1300 Lutheran congregations and individuals are taking part nationwide. It was wonderful to meet face to face with so many of you in

---

*Lutheran Woman Today* (ISSN 0896-209X), a magazine for all women, is developed by Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and published 10 times per year by Augsburg Fortress, Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440. *Lutheran Woman Today* editorial offices are at 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189.

Copyright © 1999 Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved. Except for *IdeaNet*, duplication in whole or in part in any form is prohibited without written permission from the publisher. Printed in U.S.A. Periodicals postage paid at Minneapolis, Minn., and additional mailing offices. Annual subscriptions: group rate, \$9.50 (regular or big-print edition); individual, \$11.50 (regular or big-print edition); outside North America add \$6 for postage. Single copies, \$1.35 (regular or big-print edition). POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Lutheran Woman Today*, Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, Box 1816, Danbury, CT 06813-1816.

Audiotape edition for the visually impaired \$11.50. Payable in U.S. funds. Contact ELCA Braille and Tape Ministry, Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440.

St. Louis, and we hope we get the chance to visit with more of you at future events.

*John Harper  
Church liaison,  
Equal Exchange*

*For information on the LWR Coffee Project, call Equal Exchange at 81-830-0303.—Ed.*

## THANKS AND GOD BLESS

I want to compliment Terence E. Tretheim on our Bible study for September on Genesis. Finally we have a Bible session that relates mainly to two chapters in the Bible and in language we can understand. It has been difficult for some of us older women who attend Bible studies to comprehend the lesson when we are having to look up so many different verses in so many different places in the Bible and then be able to tie all of it together to make sense. Genesis—always a good choice for a Bible study lesson. Thank you so much and God bless!

*Lila Licht  
(via email)*

*Glad to hear this. Remember, to make such cross-referencing easier, there is help in the form of a Companion Bible available for the Genesis study that contains the entire book of Genesis, plus all the cross-references needed to do the study. Order from Augsburg Fortress, 800-328-4648. (ISBN 0-8066-3861-3; \$2.95 plus shipping and handling.)—Ed.*

## JUST FYI

In the September 1999 *LWT*, Sue Gamelin writes about the saying "There but for the grace of God, go I." According to *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, "John Bradford, c. 1510-55, an English Protestant martyr, on seeing a group of criminals being led to their execution" is the originator of this saying.

*Dorothy Beggs  
(via email)*

## OLDER MOMS A SUPPORT FOR EACH OTHER

My mother receives *LWT* and she asked me to read an article (May 1999) about motherhood. It was written by a woman pastor who had her first child at age 41. I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed the article. My son was born in June 1995 and I had just turned 39. It is exhausting to be this age and have an active little boy, but the joys far outweigh the bags under my eyes and the need for coffee and Geritol.™ The author mentioned wondering what Sarah would have had to say about motherhood as an older mom. We can't ask Sarah, but we do have other older moms to talk to—and that's great.

*Kathy Grover  
(via email)*

*Send your letters to *LWT*, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631-4189 or via email to *LWT@elca.org*. Letters will be edited for length and clarity and will not receive an individual reply.—Ed. *LWT**

Art and  
photos

Dan Gill, 5;

PhotoDisc, Inc. \*, 4,  
6-7, 22-27, 35, 37, 40-  
45, 49-51, 56, 58, 62;

Courtesy Gaymoor  
Ecumenical and

Interreligious  
Institute, 17; Corel  
Gallery, 19, 20;

Courtesy Walter Rast,  
28, 29; Linnea J. West  
Wong, 35, 36, 63, 64;

Cleo Photography, 38,  
Kathleen Kelly, 46;  
Courtesy Gimi

Fazzari, 52; Courtesy  
Shirley Sundquist, 53;  
Courtesy Lydia

Mueller, 54; Courtesy  
Jean Jenkins, 54;  
Courtesy Claire  
Streng, 55; Courtesy  
Fairview Press, 60;  
Image Club  
Graphics, 65

On the cover

PhotoDisc, Inc.  
©1999

'TIS THE SEASON

4 Amen!

*Kathleen Kastilahn*  
Devotional prayers  
for today.

5 Between you  
and me

Happy new  
millennium!

*Linda Chinnia*

*The first triennium in  
the new millennium  
emphasizes justice.*

6 Prayer for Margaret

*Jean S. Platt*

*"Nine of us had gathered  
at the New Year's  
Eve party ..."*

16 "That they may  
be one"

*E. Louise Williams*

*Celebrate the Week of  
Prayer for Christian  
Unity.*

EPIPHANY

8 Season of joy

*Janet Conrad*

*How will you celebrate  
during Epiphany?*

10 Epiphany devotions  
2000

*Ruth Dyer*

*Ten devotions for you.*

BIBLE STUDY

18 A few righteous  
people

*Mary Lynn Hendrickson*  
*The stories of most-  
righteous Abraham  
and moderately right-  
eous Lot can teach us a  
thing or two.*

IN GOD'S IMAGE

*Terence E. Fretheim*  
*A Bible study on the  
book of Genesis.*

22 Sodom and  
Gomorrah  
(Session 5)

40 Children of  
Abraham  
(Session 6)

28 Where in the world  
are Sodom and  
Gomorrah?

*Walter Rast*

*Get out your maps and  
shovels.*

35 Lord, hear our  
prayer

*Thomas Droege*

*Your prayers for others  
are powerful.*

## BIBLE STUDY (continued)

### Women of the ELCA IdeaNet

A helpful newsletter found in the middle of *LWT*.

Learn about ecumenical partnerships—how women's groups have interacted with women from other denominations and faiths—in this issue of *IdeaNet*.

### Editor

Nancy J. Stelling

### Managing Editor

Sue Edison-Swift

### Associate Editor

Deb Bogaert

### Production Editor

James Satter

### Graphic Designer

ne J. West Wong

### Secretary

Bettelou Bruce

### Guest Planners

Phyllis Kersten

Louise Williams

### 38 Women of Genesis

#### Sarah and Hagar

*Beverly J. Stratton*

*Women of courage live ordinary lives of pain and promise.*

### 46 Urges of the heart

#### Barry Nelson

*Here's a shining example of hospitality.*

### 49 Children of Abraham in the classroom together

#### Theodore M. Ludwig

*A theology class made up of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish students is a figurative family reunion of "the children of Abraham."*

### 52 Reader call

#### The journey

*Abraham and Sarah aren't the only ones whose lives changed as a result of a trip!*

### 56 Give us this day

#### God's gift of presence

*Marj Leegard*

*A mother receives the gift of God's presence.*

### 58 God-like ears

#### Kathie Bender Schwich

*God heard the cries of Hagar's son. God hears our cries. God, help us hear the cries of others.*

## AND ...

### \* Letters

### 31 Coming up in *LWT*

*A handy guide to *LWT* and the Bible study during 2000-2001. You may want to pull this out for future reference.*

### 60 What to say?

*Kristen Schlauderaff*

*Our Stories of Miscarriage: Healing with Words is a book that can help.*

### 61 This life

*Laurie Shepherd*

*A poem for a friend after a miscarriage.*

### 62 Bookmarks

*Continuing education, without grades*

*Linda Post Bushkofsky*

*Reading for book groups and you.*

## BULLETIN BOARD

### 65 How to contact

*LWT, Augsburg Fortress, and Women of the ELCA.*

Opinions expressed in the magazine are those of the writers and, except for the Women of the ELCA department and the Bible study, are not necessarily those of the Women of the ELCA.

Unless otherwise cited, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible, copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

AMEN!

## DEVOTIONAL PRAYERS FOR TODAY

Kathleen Kastilahn



### THE TIME OF OUR LIVES

Did you catch millennium fever? The bug (or was it a virus?) caused many people discomfort as January 1, 2000,

approached. Symptoms included a racing heart—from worry that New Year's Eve celebrations wouldn't be as momentous as the moment—and a backache from hauling home extra “just in case” groceries. And many of those who didn't come down with the fever still suffered from headaches caused by the hassle of dealing with the afflicted.

If you find anyone coming down with a relapse, suggest Isaac Watts's famous old hymn “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” (*Lutheran Book of Worship* 320) as a remedy. Repeat these lines two times: “From everlasting you are God, To endless years the same. A thousand ages in your sight Are like an evening gone.”

*God of time, help us to live each day believing that you have been, and will be, our help and hope.*



### SECONDS THAT COUNT

This year hospitals everywhere carefully counted the seconds as each awaited its first “millennium baby.” Long ago, the time-

pieces in Bethlehem didn't count seconds. We know only that the baby whose birth set the date for counting to this year 2000 was born of Mary sometime during one silent night that changed the world.

*God of life, be with us in all the seconds of our lives. May we learn to be silent so we can hear your voice.*



### HOURS ARE OURS

The hectic holidays are over. Now it's time to get busy with everything we've put on the back burner, right? Wrong. Our to-do lists just grow longer, even as we cross out accomplished tasks. We complain about never having enough time. But we know better.

On Sundays, we pray: “Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us—ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love” (*LBW*, p. 67).

*God of love, make us generous in our spending of your gift of time. May we use our hours in loving service. LWT*

*Kathleen Kastilahn is editor of the “People & Faith” section of The Lutheran.*

*While “Shortakes” has a new name (“Amen!”) and a new columnist (Kathleen Kastilahn), it remains a monthly encouragement to prayer. Welcome, Kathleen!*

# Happy new millennium!

Linda Chinnia



January has always been a special month for me. It is the month of my birth. When I celebrated my birthdays as a youngster, I would often dream about my life in the future. What would I be doing in 1980, in 1990, in 2000? Then I would make detailed resolutions and set goals for my future.

During the years leading up to the new millennium, many of us have pondered the future with concerns such as Y2K compliance, environmental disasters, ongoing conflicts throughout the world, and hate crimes. We have heard countless prophecies predicting the end of the world.

Well, January 2000 is upon us, and the predictions of doom have not materialized. We continue, however, to be challenged by Jesus' commission and command: "Go and make disciples of all nations" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We continue to be confronted by the sins of "isms" that prevent us from enjoying the complete peace of God. We continue to hear the indictment from Micah: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (6:8).

## CONVENTION DIRECTIONS

As we begin this new year and new millennium with our customary resolutions, let's remember the four important concerns identified by the triennial convention.

1. We must plan and program for the active participation of young women.
2. We must support families by addressing their economic, social, and spiritual needs.
3. We must continue the struggles to become an anti-racist organization.
4. We must become more inclusive by affirming the gifts and addressing the needs of all participants with dignity and concern.

In short, we must do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Happy New Year! Happy New Millennium! Go in peace! Serve the Lord! Live God's Justice! **LWT**

*Linda Chinnia  
President  
Women of the ELCA*

*Watch for further "Between you and me" columns in upcoming issues. In addition to Linda Chinnia, these columns also will be written by Catherine I. H. Braasch, Executive Director of Women of the ELCA. —Ed.*

# Prayer for Margaret

Jean S. Platt

*Nine of us had gathered  
at the New Year's Eve party.  
There were four couples: us (the oldest, at 78),  
two couples in their early 50s,  
and our hosts' daughter with her date—  
college students home for the holidays.  
You, Margaret, widowed shortly  
before Thanksgiving, were the only one  
without a partner.*

*I'm sure the others were as keenly aware  
as we, when we received the invitations,  
that when the count came down to one  
and the ball dropped on Times Square,  
eight of us would turn to our mates  
for the traditional year-end embrace,  
and you, to quote a phrase  
from a popular song, would have  
"no one to turn to."*

*But, as the ball dropped,  
I glanced toward our hostess,  
knowing that you and she were closer  
than sisters, and I saw her face crumple  
as she reached for you,  
and I watched as the tears spilled over  
and coursed down your cheeks  
and noted that our host had turned away  
and was rubbing his eyes.*

One by one, then, the guests embraced,  
but we all held you longer  
than we held anyone else,  
as if somehow we could make the hurt go away.

When I held you, you tried to comfort me,  
the older woman—"It will be alright," you said,  
but we both knew it wouldn't, not for a long time.  
And I wanted to say, "Cry, Margaret;  
It's alright to cry." And I wanted to add,  
'In the morning, in the night, in-between;  
just cry! Cry alone; cry with friends  
and know that we cry with you and for you.  
Know, too, that we cry for him who is not here,  
yet, strangely, I feel his presence  
whenever I am with you,  
and I don't quite know what that means  
except that yours was a very special marriage."

Dear friend, I know that tears will mitigate the pain  
and memory will serve you well,  
but my prayer is that time  
will do the impossible  
and reaffirm the love of life  
you shared with your husband—  
he would have wanted that for you. **LWT**

Jean S. Platt, Pittsburgh, Penn., teaches poetry-appreciation classes to senior citizens. She and her husband, married 59 years, founded and operate the Interfaith Educational Fund for qualified and needy students in Pennsylvania.

# Season of joy

*Janet Conrady*

January is here, and the rush of Christmas is over. It's time to start that diet and to get back to work. But wait! We're not done yet: Epiphany, the time of God among us, is another season of joy.

***During  
Epiphany  
we ask,  
"Who is  
Jesus?"***

Epiphany shows Jesus' identity as both God and human, the promised Messiah. Epiphany is the time of God among us, of Jesus' life, miracles, and teachings. It is the time of the Incarnation, God made manifest.

*Brightest and best of the stars of the morning,  
Dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid.  
Star of the East, the horizon adorning,  
Guide where our infant Redeemer is laid.*

*(Lutheran Book of Worship 84)*

When Christmas became established as the day to celebrate Jesus' birth, Epiphany eve became the Twelfth Night, ending the 12 days of Christmas celebration with a bright star and the coming of the Wise Men. Twelfth Night was a night for bonfires to celebrate the light of the star and God's new light to dispel our darkness. Processions went through the streets and gifts were exchanged, as the Wise Men journeyed to bring gifts to Jesus. Epiphany is still often the time to consecrate bishops and commission missionaries, to send far and wide the Word of our salvation.

*Songs of thankfulness and praise,  
Jesus, Lord, to thee we raise;  
Manifested by the star To the sages from afar,  
Branch of royal David's stem  
In thy birth at Bethlehem:  
Anthems be to thee addressed,  
God in flesh made manifest. (LBW 90)*

Christopher Wordsworth, who wrote "Songs of Thankfulness and Praise" (LBW 90), used the word *manifest* 11 times in the four verses. *Manifest* is a wonderful word for the Incarnation. It means to make evident, to show plainly. The word *manifest* comes from the Latin *manus*, hand, and *festus*, struck. So, this is the God we can touch and who touches us.

*I danced in the morning when the world was begun,  
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun;  
And I came down from heaven and I danced on  
the earth;  
At Bethlehem I had my birth.*

*(Hymnal Supplement 1991, 798)*

Sydney Carter, who wrote "I Danced in the Morning," found dancing a vibrant metaphor for the second person of the Trinity, Jesus, God Incarnate. Dancing is a holistic act connecting body and soul. Jesus came, fully human and fully divine, to redeem and renew us.

Epiphany has been celebrated on January 6 since ancient times. Many congregations today designate the Sunday prior to January 6 as Epiphany Sunday. The Epiphany season continues until the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, Transfiguration Sunday.

During Epiphany we ask, "Who is Jesus?" At the beginning and the end of Epiphany, at Jesus' baptism and at the Transfiguration, we hear a voice from above: "This is my Son, the beloved" (Mark 1:11 and 9:7). Throughout the season, as we hear of miracles, authoritative teaching, and the forgiveness of sins, we hear many say, "This is the Son of God!" In Epiphany we, too, join in the joyful work of making God manifest.

Who, me? Make God manifest? Yes, we can be a way by which God touches others and is present to all others. Knowing how deeply God cares for each of us, we reach out to others for whom Jesus came, even those we find hard to tolerate, much less care about. We speak of the Word that has transformed our lives.

However you remember Epiphany this year—with a bonfire, dancing, mighty hymns, or quiet stargazing—remember that you are the witnesses, the missionaries, the stars that point to Jesus.

And finally, fellow workers in the kingdom, rejoice in these great words of William Dix, the fifth verse from *As with Gladness ...*

*In the heav'ly country bright,  
Need they no created light;  
Thou its light, its joy, its crown,  
Thou its sun which goes not down;  
There forever may we sing  
Alleluias to our King. (LBW 82)*

*Janet  
Conrady is  
a Lutheran  
deaconess  
and a regis-  
tered nurse.  
She is a  
member of  
Trinity  
Lutheran  
Church in  
Kankakee,  
Ill.*

# Epiphany devotions 2000

Ruth Dyer

EPIPHANY  
OF OUR  
LORD

January 6

## Read Matthew 2:1-12

We don't know exactly where they came from, and we aren't exactly sure whether these Wise Men knew that the bright star they followed was leading them to Jesus. Perhaps their intuition told them from the way this star seemed to light their path that something extraordinary was happening. In the night sky, they somehow caught a glimpse of God calling them. Although they had no idea where they were going on this journey, and even asked the wrong person for directions, they were led to Jesus.

In our searching to know and experience God's presence among us, we too find that our journey is a long one. Sometimes the people we seek out to give us direction are helpful, sometimes not. Sometimes people touch our lives unexpectedly; often it's "the least of these" that somehow are "light years" ahead of us in their simple trust and acts of godly compassion.

The good news is that ultimately God is the searcher and we are the sought. Like a searchlight that draws people to "come and see" what's happening in their community, God brings us home and sends us out to be a beacon for others.

Epiphany is about noticing God's searching light for us in our ordinary lives and in the people we come into contact with daily. It is about seeing God "in the least of these" while serving others and as we experience God's servanthood to us. It's about experiencing the mystery of God in plain sight, in my neighbor, in my coworker, in myself.

## Reflection

Who are the unexpected people in your life who have been beacons of God's loving presence to you?

*God of signs and wonders, help me to notice you in all those around me.*



**Read Mark 1:4-11**

Jesus hears the words, "You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." In baptism, we too are God's beloved daughters and sons. We are encouraged as Christians to remember our baptisms daily, to remember our belovedness so we can "be love" for others.

We often miss the mark of how to love our neighbor, our family, and the newcomer in our midst. And in a world full of "you're not good enough" messages, we can quickly lose a sense of our own belovedness.

God never wants us to forget how loveable we are. Remembering our baptism into God's family reveals God's love to us again. It is like a mother's love when she first holds her child and delights just in its being. Like a newborn child, there is absolutely nothing we have done, or will ever do, to deserve such affection. It is simply a divine gift.

**Reflection**

Think of a time when you experienced being held by God's love.

*God, our Creator, keep reminding me of my belovedness. Teach me to be love for others so that they, too, may know your loving presence.*



**Read John 1:43-51**

Nathaniel is skeptical about Jesus: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Phillip invites Nathaniel to "come and see."

A friend once told me that intimacy means "into me see." This definition seems to capture the kind of relationship Jesus establishes with Nathaniel. In this scripture passage, Jesus is able to see beyond Nathaniel's defenses, his questioning, his prejudices. Jesus looks with the eyes of compassion into a man who may have given up hope in himself and his world. Jesus sees a heart in need of healing and with the eyes of love sees beyond Nathaniel's lack of hope.

Jesus calls all of us to see past others' defenses, doubts, fears, and pain. When we look with love on those around us, they can begin to "come and see" and experience God's intimate love through us.

## Reflection

Think of a difficult person in your life. How would you normally describe that person? How would you describe that person after looking with eyes of love?

*Creator and Redeemer, you know me intimately; you see who I was created to be. Help me to see beyond the boundaries that separate me from others.*



## 3 EPIPHANY

January 23

### Read Mark 1:14-20

God's kingdom truly is at hand—in our hands. God has given the kingdom to all of us. We are called to be God's compassionate heart and servant hands to those in need. It can be a challenge for us to believe the gospel, to believe that we are loved and forgiven children of God who cannot be separated from this divine love.

The gospel reminds us that in God's kingdom we don't have to fish around for a way to please God. We don't hook God into loving us. God, through Jesus, fishes us out of our despair. God hooks us on the divine eternal love. When we live in the gospel of God's love and forgiveness, we can help others to do the same, and be comforted.

## Reflection

Who are the people in your life who bring God's compassion into focus for you?

*Jesus, use my heart and hands to extend your hospitality to others, to serve those in need.*



## 4 EPIPHANY

January 30

### Read Mark 1:21-28

Sometimes when we hear of evil spirits or demons, we imagine people being possessed in a sensational way, like in the movie *The Exorcist*. But we all have our own personal demons and unclean spirits that we struggle against.

Fear of the future or poor self-esteem may be demons for us. Evil spirits can keep us from noticing God's presence in our lives and in the lives of those around us. We are called to confront our demons, to name our fears so that God's healing presence may be made known to us.

## Reflection

What are your personal demons, those things that get in the way of trusting God? How might you invite God into these fears and doubts?

*Gracious Spirit, remind me of your abundant love, which has the power to cast out all my fears. Challenge me to be a source of your peace to those around me.*



## **5 EPIPHANY**

**February 6**

### **Read Mark 1:29-39**

In this passage we witness Jesus healing the sick, see his longing for solitude with God, and realize Jesus' need for his disciples to join him in ministry.

Like Jesus, we are called to wholeness and to be about healing the ills and brokenness of the world. Like Jesus, our actions are nurtured in prayerful solitude with God. Like Jesus, we too are led to discern our call.

The lonely place where we find Jesus praying is precisely where we must go to be renewed in God's strength and love. The renewal process shapes us to share and receive prayerful visions in community.

## **Reflection**

Where do you go for renewal?

*Gracious and redemptive Healer, help me to balance my faith in prayer and in action. Quiet my soul so I can discern your call.*



## **6 EPIPHANY**

**February 13**

### **Read Mark 1:40-45**

Jesus is moved by compassion when a leper says to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus heals not only the leper's physical infirmity but the emotional pain of being an outcast, rejected by his own community.

Today there are still people who remain on the fringes of our church and society, who are treated as if they were "unclean" and are not accepted as part of our community.

We are called to be a healing presence to the "untouchables" in our daily life and world. We are called to see beyond our prejudices, judgments, and lack of knowledge into the hearts of even the "least of these," because that is where we can meet God again.

When we stretch out our hand to include others, we are acting as Jesus did. We are helping those who have lost their sense of community re-live what it means to belong.

## Reflection

Who are the outcasts in your community? How might you be a healing presence?

*Compassionate Healer, remind me that your love has no boundaries. Refresh my life with those who are different from me so that I may delight in seeing you in all of creation.*



## 7 EPIPHANY

February 20

### Read Mark 2:1-12

The paralytic man in the Gospel of Mark was fortunate to have friends who could embrace him and his disease and carry him to Jesus. His healing began before he even reached Jesus: It was present in the faith of the people who brought him for healing. Their faith grasped the healing power of God, and they were able to see this man as someone who could be made well again. They invested themselves in this vision and were not disappointed.

Like the paralytic man, we are called to believe in God's healing presence in those who embrace us with compassion. And we are called to respond to those who are unable to even ask for our help. It is our task to offer our genuine love and to be present in their pain, so that they can know love again.

## Reflection

How has God's presence been brought to you through others during times of feeling powerless?

*God of all healing, help me to remember that you are with me, even when I feel isolated. Give me the heart to advocate for those who are suffering.*



## 8 EPIPHANY

February 27

### Read Mark: 2:13-22

Jesus' dinner company certainly seemed strange to the religious establishment of his day. The Pharisees required certain laws to be kept in order to please God. There were strict distinctions between peoples, and purity rules made it clear who was considered clean and unclean.

Jesus shattered their sense of what holiness is all about. He dined with the unclean, offering a radical acceptance of all people.

Today, Jesus invites us to go beyond the letter of the law, beyond religious denominational traditions that have

separated us from one another. He calls us to see the holy, the sacred, in all people. He tells us that new wine-skins are needed for this journey of faith, this new wine of the gospel.

Just as Jesus had a habit of inviting the least-expected guests to supper, we too need to be in the habit and practice of inviting those rejected by our society today to fill our churches so that they too can taste of God's banquet.

## Reflection

Who are the people in whom you find it hard to see God's holiness? What would need to happen in order for you to welcome the person(s) whom you would rather not have as a "table guest"?

*God, you call me to your bountiful banquet. Teach me the table etiquette of your kingdom.*



SFIGURATION  
OF OUR LORD

March 5

## Read Mark 9:2-9

The disciples are instructed to listen to Jesus—and they do. Their listening asks questions as they seek to understand who this Jesus is. At other times theirs is a listening that must wait and see—a patient listening, listening that reflects on what has been said.

What does it mean for us to listen to Jesus? It means hearing the Word of God in our church communities, in the people we come into contact with every day, and in ourselves. It means paying attention to how God has become incarnate in others. When we listen to Jesus in the scriptures, we hear of compassion and love, and respect and dignity for all life. When we listen to these words, we are listening to God's heart.

## Reflection

Think of a time when someone listened to you with their whole heart. What is it like for you to listen to others with your heart?

*God, Lover of all, I yearn to hear your voice. I am ready to listen, to be attentive to your heart. LWT*



*Ruth Dyer is a Lutheran deaconess and an elementary-school guidance counselor. She is a member of Emmaus Lutheran Church in Orange City, Fla.*

# “That they may be one”

*E. Louise Williams*

***I ask not  
only on  
behalf of  
these, but  
also on  
behalf of  
those who  
will believe  
in me  
through  
their word,  
that they  
may all  
be one.***

*(John 17:20-21)*

It is almost more than my mind can comprehend or my heart can hold—so big has my experience of the church of Jesus Christ become.

A year ago I was in Africa—Harare, Zimbabwe—at the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Sometimes when I close my eyes, it is as if I am still there in the big, blue, circus-style tent that was our place of worship every morning before the sessions began. I liked to get there early—not just to get a good seat, but also to watch the 4000 or so people come down the paths across the University of Zimbabwe campus and into the tent.

My eyes feasted on the marvelous diversity of hues of skin and types of dress—from bright African prints to jeans and T-shirts, and from the black robes of the Orthodox priests to beautiful saris with golden threads. And all the while I heard the music from the choir of maybe 150 voices, mostly folks from local churches in Harare, teaching us some of their favorites in the Shona language and learning with us songs and chants from Malaysia and Brazil, El Salvador and Australia, Russia and Korea.

And then there was a moment of silence. The drum sounded, and our formal worship began. For 20 or 30 minutes I think we were one as we sang and prayed and heard the word, sometimes read in languages I didn't even know existed. And, ah, when we confessed the Creed and prayed the Lord's Prayer, we all used our own languages, but I think God heard it as one voice. For just a little bit, we had a glimpse of what Jesus was praying for that last night after supper with his disciples: “May they all be one.”

For a little bit, we glimpsed the gift: the unity of the church of Christ. This unity—not to be confused with sameness (there surely wasn't much sameness in the

tent) and not created by theological dialogues, structural maneuvering, mergers or anything else that we can do—begins in God and happens for us when Jesus' own life and love flow into us and draw us into the oneness that Jesus has with the one called Father.

It is receiving the gift of unity and experiencing it, even in little snatches, that draw us into the prayer that Jesus prays with such longing: "May they all be one."

Jesus remembers how we were created—to be one—in communion with God and with each other and with the whole creation. It is no longer so. We need not look far to find the brokenness—in ourselves, in our personal relationships, in the church, between peoples and nations, indeed throughout the whole creation.

That brokenness was evident, too, those days in Harare. There on African soil, we felt the plight of poor nations laboring under huge debts to rich nations, the scars left by



generations of racism and apartheid, and the ravages of war, especially on the children. And we found that the same people who gathered under the worship tent in the morning later in the day found themselves painfully divided over issues like the ordination of women, inclusive language, homosexuality, how involved the church should be in politics or social welfare, whether everyone can be welcomed at the same eucharistic table, or how decisions should be made so that the minority voices are taken seriously. (Doesn't that list sound familiar?)

We know the brokenness. By God's grace, we also glimpsed the gift of unity. Think of where it is that you have had that glimpse, that foretaste of the feast to come, when all will be one.

In the meantime, Christian unity is not just something for us to have or to wait for. It is also something for us to do. When we join in Jesus' prayer—"May they all be one"—we ache over the brokenness. And with Jesus, we work for

reconciliation. No matter how different our vocabularies or cultures or traditions or doctrines, we struggle, seeking common ground upon which we can stand together. We struggle to give visible witness to Christian unity so that the world may know the love of God that sent Jesus into the world, the love of God that now sends us into the world. We are entrusted with the awesome task of showing by the way we are—showing the world what God longs for—that we may all be one, restored to full communion with God, with each other, and with the whole creation.

It is almost more than my mind can comprehend or my heart can hold.

In the name of Jesus, Amen. **LWT**

*E. Louise Williams of Valparaiso, Ind., is executive director of the Lutheran Deaconess Association. This article is an adaptation of a sermon given at Valparaiso University to mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.*

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is observed January 18-25. For information about the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, or for resource materials available to help congregations mark the event, call Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute at 914-424-2109 or the ELCA Department for Ecumenical Affairs at 800-638-3522, ext. 2610.

# A few righteous people

*Mary Lynn Hendrickson*

The word *righteousness* can sound a bit exotic to the ears of us modern-day Christians. Not only isn't it part of everyday usage, but when it is used, it's often in a negative sense—maybe now more than ever, with an election year upon us and the "self-righteousness" of candidates especially evident in the midst of mudslinging campaigns.

I thought about "righteousness" a lot a few years ago, when I was an editor on a small religious magazine whose aim was to help ordinary Christians weave justice concerns into daily life. I would find myself wondering about "righteousness" because in many parts of the Bible, depending on the version, *righteousness* gets translated as *justice*.

In particular, I used to think of it in relationship to an old joke we had around the office when flashy public-relations people pitched us simplistic story ideas and novice writers turned in assignments that weren't quite on the mark. We used to laugh and say that such people must think that justice ultimately means, "It's nice to be nice to nice people"—as though Jesus' primary aim was to teach us to be exceedingly polite, à la Miss Manners and Martha Stewart.

Nice to nice people? A good reading of Luke 6:32-34 always seemed to be in order. Jesus said: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same."

But without such an occasional reminder, sad to say, humankind's natural tendencies can be to reduce Jesus' notion of "justice" to "just us"—either of the simply chummy or of the outright vengeful kind.

And Jesus clearly said anything but that. Instead, he was quick to remind his listeners of the obligation we have toward "the stranger"—an obligation that has Jesus asking us to love even the "strangest" of strangers, our

enemies. "Love your enemies," Jesus says quite specifically a little later in that same passage from Luke (6:35), and "do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return."

Jesus' reminder about "the stranger" is a good one because it describes the understanding of righteousness seen all the way back in Genesis 18 and 19. Here are the stories of two righteous men: the familiar story of a most righteous Abraham trying to intercede on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah and eventually getting God to guarantee that the cities will be spared if there can be found within them as few as "10 righteous men," and the almost parallel story of the one "moderately righteous" person to be found in Sodom, a man named Lot.

Abraham's story and Lot's story are alike in that they both illustrate the extent to which each man practiced the Hebrews' self-understood obligation to provide



hospitality to unknown guests. ("Hospitality," from the Greek *philoxenia*, means "love to strangers.")

The two stories are also strikingly different. While Lot simply bowed to the strangers who approached the city gates, Abraham ran out to meet his guests; while Lot provided a simple spread of unleavened bread, Abraham lavished his visitors with fine cream and cheese, a choice steer, and a luxurious loaf of bread made on the spot by Sarah.

While Abraham is wise and respectful in his conversation with those whom he finally discovers are heavenly guests—and ever cautiously queries God further and further about divine judgment for the righteous few in Sodom—Lot is foolish and hesitant. Lot offers his daughters to be molested by the marauding crowd and leaves the doomed domain of Sodom only at the very last minute, and even then with his visitors literally having to drag him and his family out by the hand.

What, then, might the modern-day Christian learn from such a story? What justice lesson might be learned from the "righteousness of a few"? I think there are two lessons—or better yet, two models. For the twinned tales of Abraham and Lot beg the question: just who was the one righteous man of this story—the larger-than-life, single-handedly heroic Abraham who goes on to people a great nation and is privileged enough to have God confide in him, or the bumbling and hesitant Lot, who is spared from the destruction of Sodom despite his dysfunctional family and poor sense of priorities?

The answer is probably both, with examples abounding in contemporary attempts to practice Christian justice.

As dismal as the world can sometimes seem, one can almost sense divine intervention in the miracle of such single-handedly heroic people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Oskar Schindler. One can literally see the quiet revolution of "hospitality to strangers" in the heroic work of Dorothy Day, who in 1933 helped launch the Catholic Worker Movement among the urban poor, which has grown into many different denominational expressions. And one can only imagine some sort of heroic miracle in the mind-boggling mercy of a Marietta Jaeger—an outspoken opponent to the death penalty despite the fact that her young daughter was molested and murdered on a family camping trip in 1973—

a person who, like Abraham in his intercession on behalf of Lot, advocates a deliverance for those who might not seem to deserve it.

As grateful as we are to the Kings and the Schindlers, the Days and the Jaegers of this world, such heroism on behalf of justice can seem to let the rest of us off the hook. But I don't think that's Jesus' intent—nor is it the intent of God, who long ago scripted the obligation that all believers practice hospitality to strangers (see Deuteronomy 10:17-19), however halting the attempts.

For the rest of us, it seems our lot is to be more like Lot. We can exercise our collective muscle for justice—pool our resources—by perhaps plugging into a community-organizing effort. We can practice our hospitality to strangers. We can build all work for justice upon the foundation of solid and respectful relationships.

We do not have to be full-time "justice professionals" to be among God's righteous. Nor do we have to be experts or exceptional to exercise our Christian commitment to the strangers among us. As a colleague of mine once pointed out, the good Samaritan did his famous deed on an ordinary day while on his ordinary way—stopping just long enough to collect a hurting stranger and deposit him in a situation of hospitality before continuing on to his work or home.

Clearly, we can walk with God on the road to Sodom or Soweto, like an Abraham or a Nelson Mandela—but we can also walk with our God on a more ordinary path, like on the sidewalk to engage a homeless mom and her children in conversation, or by "pounding the pavement" to picket outside a sinful sweatshop that exploits new immigrants.

As the prophet Micah says, what does the Lord require of us "but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" with our God (6:8). **LT**

*Mary Lynn Hendrickson is an associate editor at U.S. Catholic magazine in Chicago and is president of Associated Church Press. She and her husband, John Gagen, are the parents of 3-year-old twins.*

# In God's Image

## A Study of Genesis

Terence E. Fretheim



### SESSION 5\*

## Sodom and Gomorrah: Intercession and judgment

### STUDY TEXTS

Genesis 18:16—19:38

### MEMORY VERSE

"I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice." (Genesis 18:19a)

### OVERVIEW

In this session we consider the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The issues in this story include the sins of Sodom, the intercession of Abraham, the question of God's justice, the destruction of the cities, and Lot's abuse of his daughters.

### OPENING

Holy and righteous God, you created us in your image. Grant that we may contend fearlessly against evil and make no peace with oppression. Help us to use our freedom to bring justice among people and nations, to the glory of your name. Amen. (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, prayer p. 37, adapted)

### PASSING JUDGMENT

In the story of the flood, God promised never again to

---

\* Most groups will use this session during January 2000. Find session 6 on p. 40.

destroy the earth because of sin and evil. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah shows that destructive judgments may still occur, though on a smaller scale. Abraham intercedes for these wicked cities, urging that justice be done so that the innocent people of these cities would not suffer the same fate as the wicked. Yet God does not wish judgment on anyone, even the worst of sinners. Perhaps over time the righteous could have a positive effect on the wicked and on the life of the cities. Then judgment would not be necessary. We are asked to think about whether Abraham's prayer can be a pattern for our own prayers.

**1.** Reflect for a few moments on your prayers. For whom (or what) do you most often pray? It is easier to pray for those we know and love. When have you found yourself praying for people you do not know or with whom you disagree?

If you are a typical Christian, your prayers are most often focused on yourself or on people or situations with which you are closely associated. At the same time, you might ask whether your prayers are too centered on yourself and too rarely on other people, especially those whom you do not like or whose sins offend you.

In this text, Abraham intercedes on behalf of a wicked city. He is especially concerned about the righteous in the city, but the entire city is in view. Though he must have Lot and his family in mind, he does not mention his nephew. Remember, too, that Jesus told us to pray for our enemies in Matthew 5:44. In Jeremiah 29:7, Jeremiah urges the exiles in Babylon to pray for the wicked city in which they live.

## MAKING DECISIONS

**2.** **Read Genesis 18:16-19.** God chooses not to hide from Abraham what is about to happen. Abraham and his household are charged with doing righteousness and justice, so that they will become more in tune with what God is about in the world. Are you surprised that God chooses to include Abraham in the decision?

God wants Abraham to be involved in deciding the fate of the wicked cities because God has chosen him, made promises to him, and given him a role among the nations of the world. To be a blessing to all nations (12:2-3), Abraham must become involved in situations of injustice. Abraham's heirs are also to be involved, and so he must teach them "to keep the way of the Lord by doing justice and righteousness." God wants us, like Abraham, to know more about what God is doing in the world. We are, after all, heirs of Abraham who have received the Holy Spirit to lead us into all the truth (John 16:13).

Justice and righteousness are closely related words in this text. Those who are righteous—that is, right with God (15:6)—are to do justice to this relationship in which they stand. This means we are to speak and act in ways that promote life, health, and well-being in our communities, even though they may be filled with people who consider themselves "good," but who often ignore these concerns.

Christians, the heirs of Abraham, are not simply to pray regarding matters of justice. We are to do justice and to *become involved* in the promotion of justice among the cities and nations of the world. And, like Abraham, we are to teach our children about doing justice and show them by our own example how justice is to be lived out in all our relationships.

## **HAVING INFLUENCE**

In the Old Testament, God often engages people in conversation (for example, Moses in Numbers 14:11-25). Because of the nature of the relationship God has with people, God takes their thinking into account in deciding what to do. What people think and say, often voiced through their prayers, matters to God.

In Genesis 18:20-25, God has heard the cries of those who are being oppressed by the wicked in Sodom. The word *outcry* also is used for the Israelites being oppressed in Egypt, a cry that God heard and responded to (see Exodus 2:23-25). God investigates the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah more closely by talking to Abraham and getting his views on the matter.

Abraham is not fearful or passive before God. He asks blunt and direct questions. He knows that God welcomes and values the kind of interaction where people are open and candid and tell it how it really is with them.

**3.** Abraham's bold approach to God is similar to the boldness expressed in many psalms. Think of a situation in your life when you might have used one of these two psalms with God.

Psalm 13:1-4

Psalm 44:23-26

Abraham expresses to God his concern that, in the destruction of the city, the righteous (those who had not participated in the conduct that led to the outcry) will be destroyed along with the wicked. And he frankly questions how God can be a just judge if that happens.

**4.** **Read Genesis 18:26-33, Exodus 34:6, and Ezekiel 18:32.** Are the statements about God in Exodus and Ezekiel reinforced in the Genesis text?

Something may emerge from this interaction with Abraham that calls for a different divine direction for the city. God will take Abraham's opinion about this matter into account. Note that Abraham is the one who first stops replying (18:32).

We are not told why Abraham does not suggest fewer than 10 righteous people. Perhaps he sees that, with so few righteous people, God's judgment would be just. Abraham would leave the fate of the few righteous ones in the city up to God. Because of Abraham (19:29), God takes action—and Lot and his family are led from the city before it is destroyed. If there were other righteous people in the city, we don't know it.

Another insight from this conversation is that it takes very few righteous people to have a positive effect on the future of a city (or even a congregation or a family). However, wickedness can become so deep and broad in a city (or any community) that a small number of righteous people are not able to counteract its devastating impact.

## THE SIN OF SODOM

**5. Read Genesis 19:1-14.** What are the sins of Sodom, according to Genesis? (Verse 9 can give you a clue.) What sin of Sodom does Jesus recall in Matthew 10:14-15?

This text invites you, the reader, to make a judgment on whether Sodom deserves judgment. Verse 4 makes clear that every man (of every age) in the city was caught up in this threat of violence. They demand violent sexual activity (the words *to know* refer to sexual intercourse). If the entire male population had succeeded, the result could only be described as gang rape, not a private sexual act.

The sins of Sodom are presented as more social than individual. It is important that this behavior be recognized only as an illustration of the wickedness of Sodom. Other texts (for example, Ezekiel 16:49-50) make clear that the sins of Sodom have commonly to do with matters of social injustice.

The violence is not directed just at Lot's guests. In Genesis 19:6-8 and 30-38, Lot offers his own daughters, hoping to appease the men of Sodom with the invitation to "do to them as you please" (19:8). Note that they were betrothed (19:14). This behavior is but another example of the depravity of Sodom.

**6. How do you respond to a story like this? Did you ever really hear this part of the story before? Are you more puzzled, angry, or shocked?**

In Genesis 19:30-38, Lot, while drunk, has an incestuous relationship with his daughters. He becomes the passive sexual object he had earlier decided they should become.

The Bible does not shrink from telling us how life really is for some people, even though it may make us uncomfortable. By including a story as violent and perverse as

in this one, the Bible asks us to think about such matters rather than seek to escape from them. You are asked to think about your response to such realities of life.

## DESTRUCTION AND ESCAPE

7. **Read Genesis 19:24-29.** How would you describe what happened to the city? How have you usually understood what happened to Lot's wife? Was she punished, or did she simply suffer the consequences of a foolish act?

The effect on Sodom was an ecological disaster. It may be that the tar pits and other chemical deposits common to the area exploded in a storm of fire (14:10; 19:24). The area was turned from a garden like Eden (13:10) into a charred wilderness. The text interprets this event as the effects of human sin on the environment. The fact that sins do have effects like these is called the judgment of God.

As for Lot's wife, the explosion probably engulfed her with fire and chemicals, as it would have done to others who did not get out of the way quickly enough. She acted foolishly by ignoring a warning in a dangerous situation, but the text does not indicate that this was a punishment; it simply describes what happened to her (verse 26). A pillar of salt—common in the Dead Sea area—would not be too far-fetched an image for what happened in such an explosion.

## LOOKING AHEAD

In the next session we will be studying the story of Hagar and Ishmael, a neglected wife and child of Abraham. Prepare by reading **Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:1-21**, and learning Genesis 22:17a. **LWT**

Terence E. Fretheim is professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Pastor Fretheim is the author of *The Suffering of God* (Fortress Press, 1984) and coauthor of *The Bible As Word of God* (Fortress Press, 1998).

Copyright  
© 1999  
Augsburg  
Fortress.  
May not be  
reproduced  
without  
permission.

Address  
questions and  
comments to  
Barbara  
Hofmaier,  
director for  
educational  
resources,  
Women of the  
ELCA, 8765  
W. Higgins  
Rd., Chicago,  
IL 60631-  
4189.



# Where in the world are Sodom and Gomorrah?

*Walter Rast*

The Bible commonly locates Sodom and Gomorrah in the region of the Jordan River or the Dead Sea, although the references to the cities are very general (see Genesis 13:10 and 14:3). The notation that Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt upon looking at the burning cities (Genesis 19:26) also suggests the area of the Dead Sea, known in Hebrew as the Sea of Salt.

*Inside the ancient city of Bab edh-Dhra, with the scattered stones of the buildings fallen all about the site.*

These descriptions open up many problems, however. Do the Bible's designations suggest that the cities might come to light somewhere in the Jordan Valley, or along the northern or southern half of the Dead Sea, or on the east or west side? Or might these cities be irretrievably submerged beneath the sea? Those who believe the latter feel that the Bible means just that when it refers to the Dead Sea as having supplanted the ancient cities (Genesis 14:3).

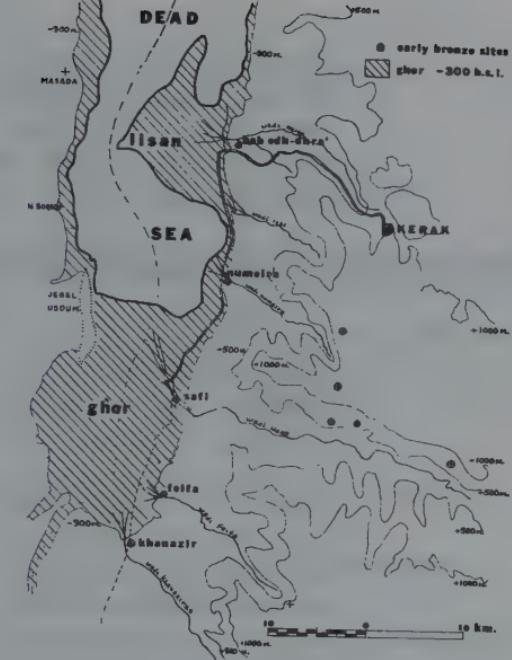
Some students of the Bible are skeptical about theories concerning the location of Sodom and Gomorrah. These students argue that the stories about these cities are on the whole fictitious accounts and, consequently, they cannot give any historical or geographical information at all. Others came to the same conclusion but from a very different perspective, by taking the Bible's theological point as the key, namely, that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were so wicked that God wiped out any trace of them (Deuteronomy 29:23).

There are good reasons for believing that the locating of Sodom and Gomorrah originated with non-Israelite people who lived east of the Dead Sea. The Genesis accounts of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the references to them in the prophets, connect the cities with

Transjordan, the country of the Moabites and Ammonites. This connection can be seen above all in the narrative of Lot's incest with his daughters in Genesis 19:30-38, in which the daughters contrive a way to preserve offspring for Moab and Ammon, non-Israelite peoples (verses 31-32).

What do we know archaeologically about the Dead Sea region today, and is there any evidence for where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah may once have stood? Most scholars today believe the location is somewhere in the southern half of the Dead Sea, and they have reached this conclusion on the basis of the biblical references (for example, see Genesis 10:19, which locates Sodom at the end of a line drawn to the east from Gaza). A number of biblical atlases consequently show that the cities may have been located where the shallow southern basin now stands, and that this area filled in after the destruction of the cities.

Some modifications to this view have come about in recent years, partly in response to excavations along the southeastern side of the Dead Sea. Since 1975, Thomas Schaub, of Indiana University of Pennsylvania and I have



co-directed the Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan. Our multidisciplinary digs, employing a staff of scholars in different fields of expertise, have included extensive survey work of the southeast region of the Dead Sea, in addition to excavation of several sites.

In the process we have concluded that any location for ancient cities below the south basin of the Dead Sea is highly unlikely. One of our staff has studied deep cores taken from the southern basin, and these have shown no evidence of human habitation in the area now covered by these waters. Our local resource surveys have also determined that, had the southern basin been open land

*Bab edh-Dhra' and Numeira were located above the southeast plain of the Dead Sea in Jordan.*

in antiquity, it would not have been used for settlement, since land for agriculture in this region was scarce.

Our excavations have focused on the ruins of two towns, known only by their modern Arabic names of Bab edh-Dhra' and Numeira. Both ruins are found on the first level of hills above the southeast plain of the Dead Sea in Jordan. Both were fortified sites, with walls and reinforced gateways. The larger of the two, Bab edh-Dhra' (almost directly opposite Masada in Israel), had an estimated population of 1000 people, while Numeira, about eight miles to the south, had about 400 inhabitants. Both cities were destroyed about 2350 B.C., based on the two most important ways to measure time in Palestinian archaeology: pottery forms and radiocarbon dating.

These newly recovered data bring to mind an observation made by Professor Emil Kraeling of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago 20 years before the recent expedition began its work. Kraeling wrote:

"Recent writers of the highest competence have been willing to assume

that Sodom and Gomorrah lay by the Dead Sea shore and that they were submerged by the rise of the waters. However, the land suitable for agriculture was precious in a country like Palestine, and was reserved for that purpose. One must therefore look for the sites of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Zoar on higher ground and back from the lake."\*

The two sites are therefore interesting to consider in relation to the traditions of Sodom and Gomorrah. This does not mean that these are the ancient cities, but the ruins do show what cities were like in the time period in which we might place these stories.

Somewhere under the blazing sun near the Dead Sea rest the remains of the inhospitable cities. And Lot's wife's natural monument, so long venerated by Christian pilgrims, looks out over them.

For anyone touring Jordan, Bab edh-Dhra' and Numeira can easily be reached by main roads from Kerak or Amman. Anyone willing to do a bit of walking and climbing, plus enduring the heat of the Dead Sea region, will find the effort rewarding.

LWT



Walter Rast is retired from full-time teaching at Valparaiso University (in Indiana) and holds the position of Senior Research Professor at Valparaiso. He is the author of *Through the Ages in Palestinian Archeology*.

\* Emil G. Kraeling, *Rand McNally Bible Atlas* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1956), p. 71.

# Coming up in LWT 2000-2001

## SUMMER 2000

*The June and July/August 2000 issue will carry Rest and Renew, a three-session Bible study. Leader helps for these studies will be included in the issues.*

### June 2000

#### REST

Time out for Sabbath; Prayers for 3 a.m.; Listening for God.

**Bible study session A:** Resting for, resting from (Genesis 2:1-3, Exodus 20:8-11).

**Reader call:** "Not always on Sunday" (due February 1, 2000). *Where do you find Sabbath time?*

### July/August 2000

#### RENEW

Everyday holiness; Earthcare; Renewing relationships; Women of the ELCA Thankoffering devotion; Getting ready to act.

**Bible study session B:** Everyday holiness: Practicing the presence of God (Psalm 104, Psalm 46:10, Exodus 13:21-22).

**Bible study session C:** Renewing gratitude: Practicing God's jubilee (Leviticus 25:10-17, 1 Thessalonians 5:16).

**Reader call:** "Renewed, revived, refreshed" (due February 15, 2000). *Tell of a time when you had a "faith surge."*

## FALL 2000-SPRING 2001

*The September 2000 issue will premiere the nine-session Bible study, Acts: The Promise Is for You.*

### September 2000

#### ACTS: THE PROMISE IS FOR YOU

Introducing Acts; Who is the Spirit? Blowing through boundaries.

**Bible study session 1:** Celebrate the Spirit! (Acts 1:1-14, 2:1-42).

**Reader call:** "A story of baptism" (due April 14, 2000). *Share your experience of a meaningful baptism.*

**October  
2000****BOLD IN THE NAME**

In the name of Jesus; Healed and whole; Testify!

**Bible study session 2:** Proclaim the name of Jesus (texts from Acts 3-5).**Reader call:** "The story of my name" (due May 15, 2000). *Why was your name chosen? What's its meaning?***November  
2000****IN SERVICE**

Servants for Christ; Feast and famine; Thanksgiving devotions; The stewardship of thanks-giving.

**Bible study session 3:** Gathered and scattered (texts from Acts 6-8, 11).**Reader call:** "A stewardship story" (due June 15, 2000). *How have you come to be "a cheerful giver"?***December  
2000****MAKING ROOM**

The Advent of seekers; Nurturing the Word; Transformed by the Spirit; Advent devotions.

**Bible study session 4:** Be born in us (Luke 1:26-38; texts from Acts 9-11).**Reader call:** "A transformed heart" (due July 14, 2000). *Share an experience that made you more open to others, to God.***January/  
February 2001****SPIRITED DISCIPLESHIP**

Discernment; Decisions; Discipline; Discipleship; Devotions.

**Bible study session 5:** Decisions, decisions (texts from Acts 13-15).**Bible study session 6:** Turning the world upside down (texts from Acts 16-17).**Reader call:** "The decision" (due August 15, 2000). *Tell of an experience you had in discerning God's will.***March 2001****THE WAY OF THE CROSS**

Lenten devotions; Stations of the cross; Suffering.

**Bible study session 7:** Taking the Jerusalem road (texts from Acts 18-21).**Reader call:** "A story of dying" (due October 16, 2000). *What has someone's dying taught you about life and faith?*

# IdeaNet

Jan./Feb. 2000 • Vol. 3, Number 5

For Mission Together

## Ecumenical Partnerships

The story of ecumenical partnerships in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod goes back to 1989, shortly before the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Covenant was signed by then-Bishop Sherman Hicks and then-Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The Reverend Nicholas Zook, co-chair of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission, met with Dorothy Mark (president of the Archdiocesan Council of Catholic Women [ACCW]) and me (president of the Metropolitan Chicago Synodical Women's Organization) to discuss the responsibilities that the two women's groups would have on the day of the covenant signing. We had been asked to provide coffee, punch, and cookies at the reception to follow.

Even at this first meeting, however, we discussed the broader implications of the covenant for our two groups. We felt that if the covenant was to mean anything, some action needed to come out of it.

A month later, we held a second meeting—one of many to follow—with members of both boards. We began to learn about our respective structures, purpose statements, mission areas, out-

reach efforts, and social concerns. We learned about both our similarities and our differences. We decided that in any joint event, we would focus on the things we held in common, the things that brought us together: our Baptism; our practices of praying, singing, and sharing the peace; the common elements of our liturgies; our social concerns; our faith in Jesus Christ.

At one planning meeting, we looked very closely at the covenant, especially at the "Therefore, we will" statements. Looking ahead to our first postcovenant event, a retreat, we selected two articles from the covenant to be our focus: to reflect jointly on the Word of God and pray together in joint services, and to encourage existing parish covenants and enable parishes to establish new ones.

At the same time, we realized that we in the two women's organizations needed our own covenant that could serve as a model for other interested groups. In our covenant we set forth these goals: "to encourage the women of our organizations and within our churches to share their faith and work with one

*(continued)*

another as God gives us opportunity; to promote a more localized covenant process; to experience together worship and prayer; and to formulate our goals for mutual work, cooperation, and understanding."

Our retreat, held in October 1989, was attended by board members and other leaders from both organizations. There we signed our covenant. The response to the retreat was so positive that we immediately began planning another joint event, a service for all women of the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Metropolitan Chicago Synod.

Since that first joint service, held in March 1990, we've held annual events—one year at a Lutheran church, the next at a Catholic church—usually during Lent or after Easter.

What have these events meant for the women? We have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in the homilies given and in the sharing and interactions of the participants. Whether we were Lutheran or Catholic, what mattered was our faith in Jesus Christ. For women who were part of a Lutheran-Catholic couple, or for some who were raised as Catholics but are now Lutheran, or vice versa, the joint services were an affirmation.

When we began, we had no way of knowing how many years our partnership would continue. But each year, despite changes in leadership, the tradition has continued. Over the years, we have been blessed by the women we have worked with. Their lives have touched ours. They have

become our prayer partners.

Our next event is scheduled for March 2000. As we move forward into the next century, we pray for God's continued guidance. May this covenant remind us that through God all things are possible and that where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, Jesus is in the midst.

*Ruth Beck, past president  
Metropolitan Chicago  
Synodical Women's  
Organization*

### **Ecumenical efforts for your congregational unit**

- Invite the local Roman Catholic women's club to one of your meetings. Plan a special program or luncheon. Have a guest night.
- Work together on a community project or social ministry program such as prison ministry.
- Plan a prayer service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25).
- Plan an interdenominational Bible study for adults or a joint Bible school for children.
- Support each other's events—luncheons, bazaars, and so on.
- Encourage your pastor to participate in Lutheran-Catholic events.

—RB

# Postcard Ideas

## Salad supper

Our congregational unit hosts an annual ecumenical salad supper for all the women in the community. In addition to providing the meal, we arrange for a program. One year we had speakers from the shelter for abused women; this year we had entertainment by a Christian group of puppeteers. Letters of invitation are sent to all churches in our community, and announcements are made in the local newspaper and over the radio.

*Virginia Gicklhorn  
Hope Lutheran  
Comanche, Texas*

## Lenten services

For several years our congregation has shared Lenten services with the Roman Catholic church down the block, and more recently with the Congregational church as well. The women's group from the host church prepares a soup and sandwich meal. A free-will offering is taken. Ours is given to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal.

*Nancy Brandli  
Zion Lutheran  
Warroad, Minn.*

## Wee-Care project

For the last seven years our women's unit has been involved in the Wee-Care project. Women of four denominations meet once

a month to cut, hand-sew, serge, and hand-smock tiny gowns that are delivered to area hospitals and used to dress the at-risk infants in their neonatal units. We also knit tiny caps to fit these small babies.

*Illy Wood  
Messiah Lutheran  
Knoxville, Tenn.*

## United quilt makers

Since 1970, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, and Roman Catholic women in Cornell, Illinois, have been working together on quilts for Lutheran World Relief. Two of the women work at home, one cutting up old clothes and another sewing blocks together. The others meet weekly to cut and assemble blocks. Three women take the quilts home to tie them or to quilt the tops and backs together. In their 29 years these women—now ages 74 to 91—have made almost 5,000 quilts!

*Lois Husted and Aldine Monroe  
Community Lutheran  
Cornell, Ill.*

Send all  
**Postcard Ideas**  
to

**Women of the ELCA IdeaNet**  
8765 W. Higgins Rd.  
Chicago, IL 60631-4189  
Email: IdeaNet@elca.org

## Vacation Bible School

Our Women of the ELCA unit shares a Vacation Bible School with a Congregational church in our town. The churches are within a half block of each other, so it's easy to share classrooms and sanctuaries. The children are ushered back and forth for openings, snacks, recreation, story time, crafts, and closings.

The coordinator is from our church, and the teachers and staff come from both congregations. Snacks and craft supplies are donated by both churches.

Last year we had 70 children from preschool through fourth grade. Many who attend are not members of either church, so we are reaching out to the community.

*Judith C. Berry  
St. John Lutheran  
New Baltimore, Mich.*

## All-church bazaar

We are a small rural church, and our Women of the ELCA group was finding it hard to host a bazaar each year to raise funds for our many mission projects. Other churches were having the same problem.

After some brainstorming and prayer, one member came up

with the idea of an all-church bazaar. In January we approached other churches about hosting an ecumenical fall bazaar.

Our first joint bazaar was held in October 1998, with five denominations participating. Each church was responsible for its own booth—we saw a great display of talent for crafts and decorating. A noon lunch of soups, sandwiches, and desserts was prepared cooperatively, with all sharing expenses and profits.

We declared the day a success, and we enjoyed working together with people of different faiths. We're already at work planning our second annual joint bazaar.

*Mildred Young and Marilyn Wiek  
Our Savior's Lutheran  
Oakes, N.D.*

### **Needed: ideas for making an anniversary quilt**

A participant has written to say that her church will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in the year 2000. Do others have ideas on doing a quilt for such an occasion? Please send them to *IdeaNet* as soon as possible!

# IdeaNet

Women of the ELCA *IdeaNet*, a publication of Women of the ELCA, is inserted regularly in *Lutheran Woman Today*. Editor: Barbara Hofmaier. Layout: Bettelou Bruce. Copyright © 1999 Women of the ELCA. All rights reserved.



*IdeaNet* pages may be reproduced for local use by Women of the ELCA in congregations and synodical women's organizations, provided each copy carries the notice "Copyright © 1999 Women of the ELCA, reprinted with permission."

## April 2001 RISEN INDEED!

Releasing resurrection; Forgiveness; In love and in deed; Easter devotions.

**Bible study session 8:** Rise up, hopeful ones (texts from Acts 21–24).

**Reader call:** “A forgiveness story” (due November 15, 2000). *Share an experience of forgiveness.*

## May 2001 GENERATIONS

Mary and Elizabeth; Living Acts; Pentecost devotions; Edges.

**Bible study session 9:** Passing the promise (texts from Acts 26–28).

**Reader call:** “Faith of our mothers” (due December 15, 2000). *Share a story of a foremother of faith who “passed the promise” on to you.*

LWT offers an inspiring blend of Bible study, faith-in-life articles, devotions, profiles, and personal stories of comfort and challenge. Check out these favorite columns.

- ◆ “**Give us this day.**” The wit and wisdom of Marj Leegard.
- ◆ “**Bookmarks.**” Ideas for book groups and insight for your own reading.
- ◆ “**Amen!**” Short reflections and prayers for the times of our lives.
- ◆ “**Mothering seasons.**” Reflections on parenting and spirituality.
- ◆ “**Between you and me.**” Insight and information about Women of the ELCA.
- ◆ “**Reader call.**” Short essays to touch your heart. See how you can write a “Reader call” (p. 34).

## ABOUT THE ACTS STUDY

*Acts: The Promise Is for You*, by Donna Herzfeldt-Kamprath, will also appear in *Esprit*, the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELW). Participants in ELW and Women of the ELCA will do the study at the same time.

In the book of Acts we see the Holy Spirit sweeping over the newborn community of Jesus' followers, surprising them with God's presence and power. Throughout our study, we are given new boldness to speak the word of God in a world of uncertainty, hostility, and hunger for the Spirit.

## COMPANION RESOURCES FOR ACTS BIBLE STUDY

Companion products are available for those who wish to dig deeper into the study of *Acts: The Promise Is for You*, including the:

- **Resource Book**
- **Leader Guide and Resource Book**
- **Companion Bible**

To order these companion resources, and learn about others, call Augsburg Fortress at 800-328-4648.

## ABOUT READER CALLS

*LWT* invites responses for "Reader call" columns. These are one-page essays on assigned topics and due dates. For example, the "Reader call" for the June 2000 issue ("Not always on Sunday") is due February 1, 2000.

Send your essay to *LWT* Reader Call; 8765 W. Higgins Rd.; Chicago, IL 60631-4189. At the top of your

piece, note the issue and topic, along with your name, address, and telephone number (with area code).

By submitting a "Reader call" piece, you give *LWT* permission to edit and use all or part of your essay and to allow others to reproduce the article in which your essay appears. All other rights to the essay remain yours. As a "thank you," we will give each essayist published in *LWT* a one-year gift subscription to *LWT* (to keep or send as a gift).

## SUBSCRIBING TO LWT

*LWT* comes in three versions: in a digest size, in a big-print format, and on audiotape for the visually impaired. Subscribe through your congregation's *LWT* group coordinator and save—10 issues for just \$9.50. A "group" is five or more subscribers, and a congregation may have more than one group.

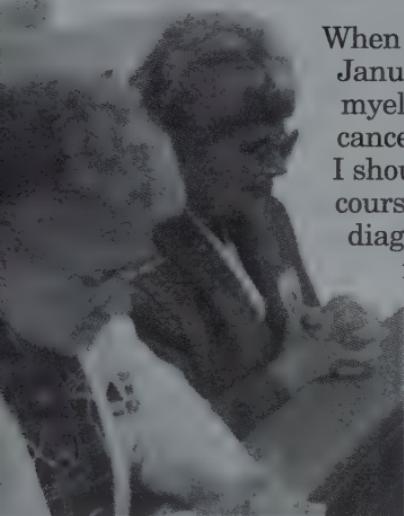
Or order an individual subscription for \$11.50. Call 800-426-0115, ext. 639, for information about subscribing to *LWT* or to learn how to offer the group rate in your congregation. For information about *LWT* on audiotape for the visually impaired, call 800-426-0115, ext. 502.

To begin a new subscription with the June 2000 issue, subscribe during March 2000. To begin a new subscription with the September 2000 issue, subscribe during June. All subscriptions are for one year (10 issues).

Find "Coming up 1999-2000" in the April, 1999 *LWT* or on the web at [www.elca.org/wo/lwt/](http://www.elca.org/wo/lwt/)

# Lord, hear our prayer

Thomas Droege

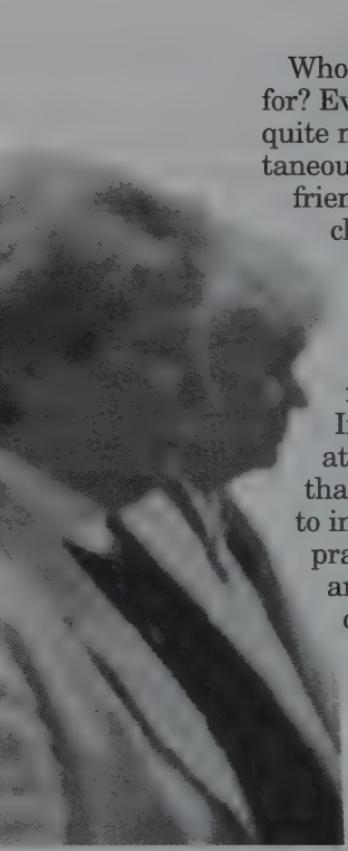


When I was diagnosed in January 1998 with multiple myeloma, a bone marrow cancer, I asked myself whom I should tell. My family, of course, but who else? The diagnosis was made in a routine annual physical. I had no symptoms. People were not likely to know unless I told them.

I made the decision to tell everyone I thought would be interested. I didn't want to be defined by the illness, but I didn't want to be all alone with it either. It was one of the best decisions I ever made. After my diagnosis, I told my pastor and asked her to announce it to the congregation and include me in the prayers of the church. I also sent an email report to family and friends all over the country, and send updates after each three-month checkup. I've shared the news with neighbors, colleagues, and friends in Atlanta. As a result, there has been an outpouring of prayer for me that sustains me in a way that only another recipient of so many and so frequent prayers could understand.

## THE POWER OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER

I share my experience, not as a guide for what others should do in similar circumstances, but as a witness to the power of intercessory prayer. Never underestimate the significance of your prayers for others. Don't ever assume that saying, "I'm praying for you" will be perceived as trite and without meaning.



Whom should you pray for? Everybody. We pray quite naturally and spontaneously for family, close friends, and fellow church members. At times, we need to be prompted to pray for the wider circle of those in need of our prayers. Intercessory prayer at the Eucharist does that by inviting us to include in our prayers people who are homeless, oppressed, and marginalized. Our relationship to people changes as we commend them to the community's and God's attention, for intercessory prayer is but one focused moment in a way of life committed to action for those in need.

Those whom we are least likely to pray for, even in church, are those we feel hostile toward—an estranged spouse, a serial killer, a despotic leader. They, too, are in need of God's care and ours, as witnessed by Jesus when he prayed for those who placed him on the cross.

### CARE FOR THOSE IN NEED

Far from being a substitute for all the practical

ways we can help those in need, prayer is a stimulus to act on their behalf. If we pray for refugees, are we not more likely to participate in the settlement of an immigrant family? This service and caring will in turn be a stimulus for more prayers, both for this family and for refugees throughout the world.

That's the way intercessory prayer works. It's one piece of a process through which God and we act to mend the broken, to comfort the bereaved, to calm the troubled spirit of those who have lost their way. By lifting people up to God in prayer, we acknowledge that justice and mercy are ultimately in God's hands, and we ask for God's blessings as we take matters into our own hands as agents of God.

What should we pray for? Everything. We don't need to evaluate our prayer concerns by some set of standards. If there's a need, pray for it.

If someone you know and care about is sick, pray for healing. I don't add the phrase "if it be your will," and I cringe a bit when I hear it in church. I know what God's will is for those who are sick—Jesus makes

that abundantly clear in the Gospels. Can you even imagine a Bible story in which someone asks Jesus for healing only to hear him reply, "That's not what God intends for you"? Jesus does sometimes test the faith of those who approach him, as when he said to the Canaanite woman, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26). But he answers her prayer, which, by the way, was an intercessory prayer.

### WHEN AND HOW SHOULD WE PRAY?

The answers to this question will be so varied as to defy description or even suggest categories. A few things are obvious. We pray when the community of faith gathers together, whether that be for worship, a committee meeting, or a prayer circle. Corporate prayer by, with, and for the community is as natural as breathing; think of it as the breathing of the Spirit in the body of Christ.

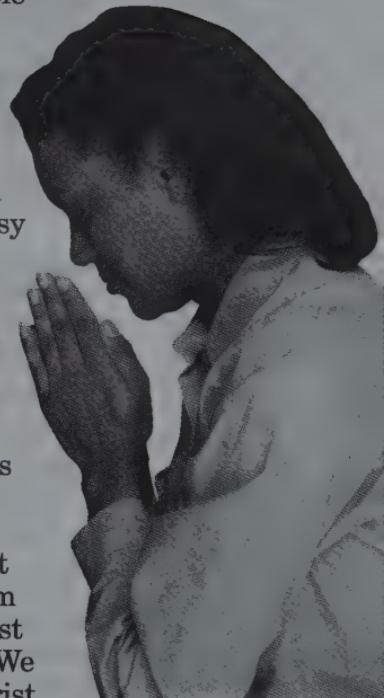
Time set aside for personal prayer is a matter of personal circumstances and preferences. I have the luxury of spending an hour in meditation each morning after breakfast.

A portion of this time is intercessory prayer. That's simply not possible for most people. Nor is it necessary. Holding a person in your thoughts for five seconds or less in the midst of a busy day is intercessory prayer.

### CHRIST IN US AND THROUGH US

Praying for others is neither a duty nor a commandment. Prayer that does not flow from the heart is at best an empty ritual. We pray because Christ dwells in our heart through faith, rooting and grounding us in love (Ephesians 3:17). When someone is in need, it is not so much we who respond but Christ who is in us, and who reaches out through us to heal and to bless.

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21). LWT



*Thomas Droege, Atlanta, Ga., taught theology for many years at Valparaiso University, Ind. He also headed the Project in Inter-faith Health, a program of the Carter Center. He currently edits Faith and Health, a publication of the Carter Center.*



# Sarah and Hagar

*Beverly J. Stratton*

Women of courage, like Sarah and Hagar and you and me, boldly live ordinary lives of pain and promise. We make difficult decisions: whether to move, to have children, to flee abuse, to begin an adventure, or to trust in God.

Sometimes our expression of courage is the daily choice to endure and survive in the face of famine, danger, injustice, deceit, betrayal, or despair. Our God, who has lived the pain and promise of ordinary life, walks with us in our choices.

Recently, at age 83, my grandmother chose to leave her hometown of the past 40 years and begin life anew in a distant city. She has traveled around the United States and back to her roots in Germany, and has decided now that her traveling days are over. Grandma has been to many funerals of friends and relatives and has lived as a widow for nearly 20 years. She has also enjoyed her four daughters, 14 grandchildren, and many great-grandchildren.

Sarah's life was similar, yet different. In a time when children were the only form of social security for the elderly, Sarah had been barren (Genesis 11:30). At an age when many elderly couples would slow down, Sarah and Abraham accept the challenge of a crazy adventure, moving to an unknown destination, boldly trusting God's promises.

Then the story gets complicated. During a time of famine, Abraham and Sarah are refugees. They go to Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20) and later to Gerar (Genesis 20:1-18), where they engage in desperate measures to survive and thrive. Fearing for his life, he claims, Abraham passes off his beautiful wife as his sister. Sarah then enters the ruler's harem, where God's intervention protects her from harm.

Sarah may have acquired her Egyptian maid, Hagar, while they were in Egypt. The stories of the triangle that emerges among these two women and Abraham are told in Genesis 16 and 21:1-21. Sarah thinks that God has closed her womb, so she gives Hagar to Abraham as a concubine (a secondary wife) for the purpose of bearing children. Though it may seem strange to us, this practice was not unusual in Abraham's time.

Hagar, a slave, was obliged to follow the commands of her mistress, Sarah. Hagar's flight from Sarah's abuse and her forced exile with her son Ishmael suggest the injustice, betrayal, and despair that she must have felt. Yet in the midst of her despair, Hagar has one of the first epiphanies. The angel of the Lord finds her in the wilderness. God, who has seen Hagar's affliction, makes promises to her. Hagar sees God, and God hears her. (The name of her son Ishmael means "God hears.")

Many women today are survivors of rape, incest, prostitution, the sex industry, and other forms of violence and abuse. Some women, like Sarah, may experience God's presence and protection assisting them in their survival and recovery from sexual exploitation. Others, like Hagar, may use their own initiative to escape or endure dire circumstances. We can be confident that God will meet us in our wilderness, hear our affliction, and give us promises.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the Sarah and Hagar stories is the relationship between the two women. Pride and jealousy lead to abuse. As with Sarah and Hagar, power differences between women today enable some of us to exploit others of us.

Like Sarah and Hagar, sometimes our jealousies, fears, indifference, and intolerance of people different from us can keep us from knowing and supporting one another. As Old Testament scholar Renita Weems observes, many of us are "just a sister away" from the kind of justice, responsibility, love, and care we all want for ourselves and our families.

May the God who hears our afflictions, who protected and sustained Sarah and Hagar, make us women of courage who will be sisters for one another. **LWT**

*Beverly J. Sratton is an associate professor of religion at Augsburg College (Minneapolis), where she teaches the book of Genesis.*

# In God's Image

## A Study of Genesis

Terence E. Fretheim



### SESSION 6\*

## Children of Abraham: Christians, Jews, and Muslims

### STUDY TEXTS

Genesis 16:1-16; 21:1-21

### MEMORY VERSE

"I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." (Genesis 22:17a)

### OVERVIEW

The church has long neglected the story of Hagar and Ishmael. Has this been because Hagar and Ishmael are outsiders and do not belong to the line of promise that leads from Abraham to Isaac to David to Jesus? Is it because Hagar is a slave? An Egyptian? A woman? Is it because Muslims trace their heritage back to Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael? The reasons are not clear, but each of the above may have been a factor. This session focuses on this neglected story.

### OPENING

Almighty God, all thoughts of truth and peace come from you. Kindle in the hearts of all your children the love of peace, and guide with your wisdom the leaders of the nations, so that your kingdom will go forward in peace and

---

\* Most groups will use this session during February 2000. Find session 5 on p. 22.

the earth will be filled with the knowledge of your love.  
*Lutheran Book of Worship*, p. 40)

## INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

In Genesis the chosen family comes into regular contact with outsiders, with people different from themselves.

One thing to watch for in your reading is how the “insiders” (Abraham and his family) treat the outsiders.

Sometimes they treat outsiders very well (for example, when Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah).

At other times, they fail miserably. The story of Abimelech in 20:1-18 is an example. Because Abraham lies to him about Sarah, Abimelech and his community get into all kinds of trouble. Abimelech has to call Abraham into account for what he has done (see 20:9-10). How will this family treat Hagar?

## PROMISES, PROMISES

We learned in session 4 that God can be counted on to keep promises. One striking thing in Genesis 16—21 is that God makes promises to the “outsiders,” Hagar and Ishmael. Because God is faithful, God is no less a keeper of promises to them than to the children of Abraham through Isaac.

1. Name people or families in your congregation or community that you (or others) consider outsiders. Why do you think of them as outsiders? Are they treated differently than insiders? How?

Christians increasingly interact with people who seem unlike ourselves and who move into our communities. We live with more and more diversity, including people whose religious beliefs are different from our own.

Mission is at the heart of what we are about, and we know that we are to welcome the stranger. But we are not always sure how best to do this. Too often, our welcoming means “come and be like one of us.” Understandably, more and more outsiders want to be accepted as they are, to be

seen as people who bring gifts to our communities because of the things that make them unique, not in spite of them.

### **SARAH (SARAI) AND HAGAR**

Interpreters of the story of Sarah and Hagar often have been critical of Sarah, saying that she has little faith and tries to fulfill God's promise by her own efforts. Yet at this point in the story, Sarai has not been named as the mother of the promised child (that happens in 17:15). God works through people like Sarai—including her mind and imagination—to carry out God's purposes in the world.

**2. Read Genesis 16:1-6.** As odd or uncomfortable as it seems to us, it was not culturally out of line for Sarai to offer her slave girl to her husband in an attempt to conceive a child. Who also does this in Genesis 30:1-4? What emotions do you think are at work in each woman as the story progresses?

When Hagar belittles Sarai's childless status, Sarai treats her harshly. Abraham, who doesn't handle this conflict very well, simply tells her to do what she has to do.

Sarah's "barrenness" is not a medical assessment; the word refers simply to her being childless. Sarah's claim that the Lord has prevented her from bearing children is her opinion (see Jacob's angry opinion in 30:2). The text gives us no reason to think that God has in fact done this.

**3. Read Genesis 16:7-16.** What is God's promise to Hagar (verses 11-12)? Hagar names God (verse 13) and explains the name as a reflection of her experience. Think of a time when you gained a new understanding of God. What would you have named God in that situation?

Hagar is not left to fend for herself. As soon as she has been banished, the angel of God appears to her, after she has left God's chosen family! This is not an angel in the normal sense, but God in human form, as we are told in 16:13. For the first time in the story, this outsider is addressed by name, and for the first time, she speaks. God is the kind of God who cares and draws her into conversation.

God responds first by recognizing that Hagar needs to return to Sarai and get that relationship straightened out, even though she was oppressed there. This is not a command to stay in the oppressive situation! (She later leaves, never to return.)

Then God speaks of her future, centered on the promise of a son. Her son will be free in a way that she (a slave) has not been. In Job 39:5-8, God celebrates the freedom of the "wild ass," probably the point in using that metaphor for Ishmael. Yet he will also live in conflict with his kin, like other members of this family (see 25:23). Hagar's response shows that she is a person of faith.

## PROMISES TO ISHMAEL

1. **Read Genesis 17:15-21.** What does God promise Ishmael (17:20)? Has God kept these promises? **Read Genesis 25:12-18.**

We looked at this text in session 4 from the point of view of God's promises to Abraham (17:4-8) and, similarly, to Sarah (17:15-16, 19, 21). Those promises stress that they would have many descendants and that an everlasting covenant would be established with their son, Isaac.

Now consider this text from the perspective of God's promises to Ishmael (17:20). Abraham didn't believe that God's promise of a child through Sarah was possible and asked that Ishmael be the child (17:18). God doesn't scold Abraham but simply says no, affirming the choice of Isaac.

At the same time, God responds to Abraham's concerns about Ishmael. God makes promises to Ishmael that are much like those given to Isaac. They include blessing, many descendants (including 12 princes), and a great nation. But 17:21 makes clear that the covenant is with Isaac, not Ishmael.

**5. Read Genesis 21:8-14.** What do you think of Sarah's and Abraham's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael?

In 21:1-7, Sarah gives birth to Isaac and expresses her joy over this wondrous gift. Note how 21:1 emphasizes that God has kept God's promise. But conflict between Hagar and Sarah breaks out once again. The reason was apparently a disagreement over which of the children would have inheritance rights (21:10).

One of the first things to notice is that God takes the side of Sarah rather than Abraham. You may agree that the sons need to shape different futures in view of the separate promises (17:15-21), but Sarah's strategy seems so harsh. God does not make people perfect before working in and through them, so God makes do with Sarah's plan.

Abraham is distressed over having to decide. But God reminds him of the promises, assuring him of a future for his son Ishmael. The description of 21:13-14 is a poignant one. Think of what it would take for a parent to send a young child off into the wilderness, with only the promises of God to rely on.

### IN THE WILDERNESS

**6. Read Genesis 21:15-21.** God provides for Hagar and Ishmael. Knowing that Muslims trace their ancestry to Abraham through Ishmael, would you say that God kept the promise made in 21:18?

What a poignant picture of mother and child is drawn in this text. Hagar is a mother at her wit's end because she cannot provide for her child. She sobs her despair, out in the middle of nowhere.

Sarah and Abraham may have forgotten them, but God has not. For the second time after Hagar has been dismissed from the household of Sarah and Abraham, God comes to help her. Hagar is given eyes to see a well of water, and both mother and son are delivered from near death.

But God was not content just to rescue mother and child. God stays with the boy as he grows up in the wilderness. Note that "God was with the boy" is also the language used to speak of God being with Abraham in 21:22. Hagar finds a wife for Ishmael from among her own people, the Egyptians. This is the last we hear of Hagar. Ishmael appears again only to bury his father (Genesis 25:9).

7. What conclusions would you draw about God's relationship to outsiders from this story? How do these conclusions inform your own life?

God comes to be with these outsiders when they have left the community of faith; God rescues them from danger, gives promises to them, and stays with them their whole life long (21:20).

If our God does these things, we certainly are to follow that example. Those of us who have received the promises of Abraham and Sarah need to remember that we have been charged with the responsibility to be a blessing to the outsiders among us.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The next session will take us on a journey with Jacob and his family. Isaac's story is quite brief and is made a part of the story of his son Jacob (see chapter 26). Prepare by **reading Genesis 25:19—33:17** and learning Genesis 28:15a. **LWT**

Terence E.  
Fretheim  
is professor  
of Old  
Testament  
at Luther  
Seminary  
in St. Paul,  
Minn.

Copyright  
© 1999  
Augsburg  
Fortress.  
May not be  
reproduced  
without  
permission.

# Urges of the heart

Barry Nelson



*Three brothers, Bertrim (8, on right), Leufrim (5), and Kushtrim (4) enjoy a Fourth of July Celebration on the state capitol grounds in Bismarck, N.D. The celebration welcomed newly arrived refugees from Kosovo.*

graves, and people fleeing. Someday, hopefully, it will also be a region associated with rebuilding and peace.

The war in Kosovo brought the refugee into our living rooms. The images of men, women, and children fleeing in terror struck a resonant chord in the American consciousness and heart.

The calls began coming in to Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota the Monday after Easter: "What can I do?" "What can my community do?" "What can my church do?" "I have a home to share." "I have time to give."

This was even before the United States announced its intent to resettle Kosovar refugees in this country. At this time, all efforts were directed at trying to get aid to the region into which the refugees were streaming.

The Bible study session for February reminds us that we are called as people of God to welcome the stranger seeking shelter. The kindness to strangers demonstrated here is a shining example of Epiphany hospitality.

Until recently, most Americans knew little or nothing about Kosovo. Today, it is a land synonymous with horror, injustices wrought on an innocent people, mass

The Spirit was moving people to respond. The jubilant strains of Psalm 146:5-9 resonated in the farmer's voice, as he called on his cell phone from his pickup: "My farmland is under water—I do not know if I will be able to plant this spring—but I have my health, I have safety. These people have nothing, and I feel fortunate that I can offer a home."

When the United States announced it would provide sanctuary to 20,000 Kosovars, the people of North Dakota were ready to respond. Volunteers at Olivet Lutheran, Fargo, quickly gathered furnishings for an apartment, even before the apartment was rented and before they knew when a family would arrive. The Grand Forks Coalition, an ecumenical group of 10 churches that had been organized around resettlement, was immediately joined by the local Chamber of Commerce, which put out a call to its members for help with employment and financial support.

Another group of churches in West Fargo quickly reorganized after a period of inactivity. When 15 individ-

uals representing Catholic, Methodist, and Lutheran churches gathered on a beautiful summer evening, it was easily decided that the coalition could sponsor three families.

In Bismarck, employees of a utilities company formed a sponsoring group as part of their community involvement.

In Fargo, a hotel owner offered free lodging in his premier hotel. The owner of a computer company offered each family a free Internet account to allow them to search out and communicate with other family members who may be scattered throughout the world. A toy retailer offered toys for all the children.

When the families began arriving, the sponsors were there at the airport. Now, the refugees were no longer just faces on the television set. They were people. And relationships began to develop.

Unfortunately, each family had stories that bore out the atrocities reported in the news. Stories of beatings, of homes burned to the ground, of relatives killed or missing.

## THE NEEDS ARE GREAT

Current estimates are that approximately 16 million refugees worldwide are outside their country of origin. Their stories can be as horrific as those of the Kosovars.

One story: Moga and his family recently arrived in the United States from Sudan after years of living in an African refugee camp. This young man, now 16, and his younger brother saw their mother murdered and fear their missing father is also dead. After walking miles through the mountains and desert, they joined up with a widowed aunt and her eight children. Now they begin life anew in the United States. The needs are great.—BN

Fortunately, stories of gratitude to the United States and its people were equally easy to tell shortly after arrival.

Kosovo represents a unique, short-term situation in the world's refugee story. In the course of two short months, 100 refugees—among several thousand throughout the country—were provided sanctuary in North Dakota. Some of those refugees have already been able to return home to a safer, if devastated, region to rebuild their lives.

Approximately two weeks after the refugee family that they hosted tearfully departed from Fargo's Hector Airport to return to their homeland, a group of volunteers from Olivet Lutheran met with a Lutheran Social Services staff person to process their experience. There were photos, reminiscing,

laughter, and tears. And there was also thankfulness: for the experience, the memories, the relationships.

Most important, there was the commitment to want to help again. "Is not this the fast I choose ... to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house"? (Isaiah 58:6,7).



*Barry Nelson is vice president of community outreach programs at Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota, where he directs refugee resettlement and immigration services. He is a member of Maple Sheyenne Lutheran Church.*

## ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

Can Christ come to us in the form of a Muslim refugee from Kosovo?

Consider Luke 24:13-35, where Jesus appears to two men on their way to Emmaus. Just as the disciples did not at first recognize Jesus as he joined them, so we in our day and age often fail to see Christ in the form of the stranger, the refugee, the asylum-seeker.

But after receiving the scriptures and the breaking of the bread, the two men's eyes are opened to the risen Christ. Likewise, as we awaken to the needs of refugees, we are offered opportunities to see and remember Christ.

Verse 32 mentions the men's memory of the event that had taken place. They speak of their "hearts burning," not unlike the feelings expressed by the volunteers who called to help the refugees of Kosovo. One individual spoke of responding to her "urges of the heart." —BN

# Children of Abraham in the classroom together

*Theodore M. Ludwig*

Can Christians learn from Jews and Muslims? One of the most interesting and rewarding experiences I have had in teaching theology at Valparaiso University is a class we call "Families of Abraham: Jews, Christians, and Muslims." We originally created this course to meet the needs of international students, many of them Muslim. It turns out that Christian students also have found this course an eye-opening way to learn Christian theology.

Since we try to keep the enrollment in the course balanced between students from a Christian background and those from Jewish and Muslim backgrounds, this class provides an opportunity for actual conversation among Christians and Muslims and Jews. For many students, this is the first time they have ever talked with a Muslim.

The purpose of the course is to introduce students to theology—in the framework of these three Abrahamic religions. We read scriptural texts from the Jewish and Christian Bibles and from the Quran. And we look at each important theological topic from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim points of view. That generates a good deal of discussion, and, I think, some important new understandings—and challenges.

Students are surprised, first of all, at the things Christians have in common with Jews and Muslims. All share the idea of the one creator God who loves all of creation, the involvement of God in human history, the promises God made to Abraham and Sarah and Hagar to bless their descendants, the sending of prophets, the call for justice and equality, the hope of



*Jewish prayer shawls*



resurrection and heavenly life, and much more. Further surprise comes with the discovery that Muslims accept all the biblical prophets and accord especially high honor to Jesus as a prophet of God and to Mary as Jesus' mother.

One important result of these discoveries is the way stereotypes and misunderstandings begin to vanish. Many people today have especially distorted conceptions of the Muslim religion and of Muslim people, based on images of intolerance and fanaticism. But the picture changes when they sit together with Muslim students and hear them talk of their devotion to God, their respect for the prophet Jesus, and their commitment to peace and justice.

Of course, Muslim and Jewish students come with stereotypes about Christians, too—not surprisingly, given the long history of persecution and domination of Muslim and Jewish peoples at the hands of Western Christian societies. But these stereotypes also begin to change when the Muslims and Jews hear the love and openness expressed by some of the Christian students.

So, an important goal of this course is simply to get beyond misconceptions and to become aware of those things shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But an equally important goal is to see and appreciate the distinctive and unique teachings and practices of each religious tradition. As Christian students learn what is really distinctive about Jewish and Islamic teachings, they also grow in understanding their own beliefs and practices.

For example, Christians sometimes have difficulty explaining the teaching of salvation by grace through faith—very often it comes out sounding like keeping the Ten Commandments is what brings salvation. In one class session, it was a Jewish student who helped Christians understand, as she contrasted the Christian teaching about freedom from the law with the Jewish (and Muslim) sense of the law's central role in spiritual discipline and education.

Or again, in talking about Jesus' death, the Muslims insisted that, according to the Quran, Jesus did not die on the cross; God would not allow a prophet like Jesus to die such a shameful death. Seeing how the death of Christ does not fit into the Muslim view of things

*Muslim mosque*

helped Christian students articulate more clearly what the theology of the cross is all about in the Christian perspective: God entering into the creation and sharing in human suffering.

With this mix of students talking about personal religious topics, what direction the conversation will take cannot always be predicted—surprising things can happen. One time, in a discussion about death and the afterlife, a Christian woman turned to a Muslim and asked point-blank, "Do you believe that Christians are going to hell?" The startled Muslim fumbled a bit and finally said, "Well, yes, I guess that's what we teach." But quickly the tables were turned, and some Christians admitted that they also were taught that Muslims and Jews will be sent to hell because they do not believe in Christ. We had quite a discussion. Fortunately, other students pointed out that there are other teachings in all three traditions about God being gracious and merciful, and that such judgments should be left up to God.

Overall, the experience of having children of Abraham—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—learning theology together in a classroom has been very positive and encouraging. Many discussions have dealt helpfully with issues of common concern, such as the role of women, caring for the sick and dying, and welcoming strangers and outsiders to our communities. Students have developed a sense of appreciation for each other as real persons, and lasting friendships have been built. The Christian students certainly have deepened their understanding of Christian faith through this dialogue learning experience, as they see how the richness of Christian faith and life is linked to the richness of the Jewish and Muslim traditions.

These kinds of dialogue learning experiences would be possible, I think, in many parish settings. Jewish and Muslim friends and neighbors could be invited to one's parish or women's group for getting acquainted and for conversation on common concerns. The local rabbi and the Muslim imam could be invited to speak at study classes. Visits could be arranged to the neighborhood Jewish temple or Muslim mosque. At the very least, Christian study classes could be broadened to include learning about the beliefs and practices of the other two families of Abraham. **LWT**



*Christian church*

*Theodore M. Ludwig, an ELCA clergy-person, teaches in the Theology Department at Valparaiso University, Ind., where he is the Surjit Patheja Professor of World Religions and Ethics.*

# The journey

*Readers were asked to write about how a trip has changed their life.*



*Ginny Fazzari  
with Maasi  
women.*

## A TRIP TO AFRICA

An invitation to a cosmetics party arrived just before I left for Africa. Sure, I thought I'll probably go, but I didn't want to think about it much in the midst of packing.

Three travel days later I was in Kenya, Africa, riding out in the wild savannah. Sightings of lions, elephants, zebras, and lanky giraffes filled our first afternoon.

As dusk settled, the van climbed a steep, winding road headed for our night's lodging near a hilltop village. The guide explained that the people walking along the roadside hiked many miles each day carrying drinking water from a central filtration plant, because all the rivers were contaminated.

Dust plumes billowed behind us as we drove this rough road. We caught up to and began to pass a woman using a crude pole for balance. A baby hung in a mesh sack flung around her shoulders, and a 5-gallon water pail was steadied on her head.

The woman and I locked glances for only a few seconds. A brief smile showed white in her beautiful black face as she was engulfed in our dust. I hope she caught my smile and wave. I wanted to connect—as human to human, woman to woman, mother to mother. I wanted to apologize for our dust, our comfort, her hardships.

Two weeks later, we came home. I turned down the invitation to the party. I simply couldn't indulge in buying costly cosmetics when much of the world doesn't have clean water to drink. Of course my appearance still matters, but my values were changed that day by a lady with a baby, a water pail, and a smile.

*Ginny Fazzari  
Union, Mo.*



Shirley Sundquist and Tip.

### A KEEN SENSE OF GOD'S PRESENCE

"This Is My Father's World" had always been a favorite hymn of mine, but not until I traveled 3500 miles out West did the words "of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; His hand the wonders wrought" become alive for me.

When I was planning my trip, I was filled with fear. I was a young widow with a severely diabetic son. Did I dare venture to go so far from home and medical help? But my family urged me to go, so putting my fears behind me and placing my trust in God, we set out for the West.

As I stood overlooking a deep canyon in the Badlands, the words of the hymn by Baring Gould brought a comforting thought: "Gates of Hell shall

never gainst the world prevail, we have God's own promise and that cannot fail." Moving on into the Black Hills, I was awestruck by the beauty of the trees and streams of water. As I stood beneath the gigantic memorial on Mt. Rushmore, with the sun streaming through the pines, I felt closer to God than ever before. The words of the Swedish hymn "How Great Thou Art" filled my soul.

Continuing further in the Black Hills and on then into Yellowstone Park, viewing the wonders of God's creation, I felt a keen sense of God's presence everywhere about me. In Cody, Wyoming, I came across the following prayer for protection. It was printed on a little white card, lying on our motel desk. I have kept it all these many years. What a blessing!

*The light of God surrounds us,  
The love of God enfolds us,  
The power of God protects us,  
The presence of God watches  
over us;*

*Wherever we are, God is.*

Shirley Sundquist  
Madison, Wis.

### JOURNEY WITHOUT DESTINATION

January 1944. Silesia, Southern Germany. A sudden order by the military to leave the village and take only what one could carry.



*Lydia Mueller*

An unforgettable, forced journey without a destination, preparation, or any guarantee of return. Survival became the key. No one was there to advise, no one had the answers. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

Where did I, a young mother, get the wisdom to discern the priorities? The baby needed personal identification, parents' pictures, and addresses of next of kin tied on. The first item to be packed into the back-sack was a 100-year-old Bible, then my husband's diary, pictures, papers, addresses, clothes for all temperatures to be worn in layers, comfortable shoes, raincoat, writing materials, and medication.

This unforgettable journey lasted two weeks and led us to a refugee camp in Austria. It was an accelerated education in finding values: Life itself, our rela-

tionship to God as the giver and taker, peace, respect for fellow humans, and faith—the ultimate strength in overcoming struggles.

"The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble" (Nahum 1:7).

*Lydia Mueller  
Glendale, Ariz.*



*The house in Winnipeg that was home to the Jenkins family.*

#### **GOD IS FAITHFUL**

Our Toyota Camry was brimming with everything our family would need for the next three months, barely leaving room for our two small children. It was September 1991 and we were driving from Binghamton, New York, to Winnipeg, Manitoba, for my husband's fall-semester sabbatical. We broke up the trip by stopping several times to visit friends and family.

On the sixth day, we left friends behind and headed north on I-29 into Canada. The skies were gray and threatening, reflecting my

hood perfectly. Numerous questions badgered me: Where would we live? How would we find a church? What would fill my days while my husband was at work?

I'd been praying about these issues, but answers were slow in coming. It was hard to trust God to provide for us when everything seemed so uncertain.

A half hour after our arrival in Winnipeg, a graduate student dropped by our hotel with welcome news; he had found a house for us. Two days later, we moved in. The house was tastefully furnished and came complete with linens and housewares. There were even spices in the kitchen cupboard.

The nearest Lutheran church welcomed us with open arms, and settled right into a weekly Bible study group. Within a few weeks I'd met my neighbors, most of whom were also mothers with small children at home. At their invitation, I joined Y-Neighbours, a weekly support group for mothers of preschoolers. I made so many friends at church and in the neighborhood that I hated to leave Winnipeg in December.

This trip reassured me that God is faithful and encouraged me to trust God with all of my concerns. For despite my doubts, God provided abundantly, far more than I had asked for or imagined (Ephesians 3:20).

*Jean D. Jenkins  
Binghamton, N.Y.*

## **"IT'S LIKE GOING TO THE MOON"**

As we prepared for a trip to find her birth family on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian reservation in Ft. Yates, North Dakota, I offered our Native American adopted daughter a few words of caution. We really didn't know if we'd make contact with her birth family, nor did we know if we would be accepted in Ft. Yates when we arrived. She replied, "It's like going to the moon."

Going to the moon. What a great idea! "One small step ..." It brings everything into focus. Daring to approach the unknown. A leap of faith.

In our leap of faith we found the birth family and they accepted us into their community.

In Proverbs 3:5-6 we read about trusting in the Lord and how he will direct our paths, even for a journey to the moon.

*Clarie Renslo Streng  
Garland, Texas*



*Clarie and Susan Streng at Standing Rock Nation in Ft. Yates, N.D.*

# God's gift of presence

*Marj Leegard*



closed door to eat as best she could. She smelled the kerosene lamp burning in her room and wondered why they bothered to light it.

Sometimes the girls came in to ask questions about cooking. She pretended to be asleep. She could not bear to think about her kitchen or the washtubs or the tiny baby. She heard family noises going on beyond her closed door, and she knew the time by the sounds. The days were long and the nights were longer.

Then the day came when the girls stood together beside her bed. They ignored her feigned sleep. They must have been holding hands for courage because their voices came from the same spot and they finished each others' halting

She lay in darkness ... total darkness. Oh, she knew it was coming. The dimming. The gray. Striving to see until the tears came. But now there was nothing. Nothing but fear and doubt and a new baby and her husband and the house and the other children. It was too much. She retreated deeper into the darkness. She stayed in her bedroom telling herself that it was the only safe place. The girls brought her meals, but she stayed behind the

ntences. "Mama," they said, "we  
n't do everything. We need help."

She wanted to shout, "You need  
elp? What about me? What about  
y eyes? The doctor did everything  
e could but out here at the end of  
where there is no help!" But she  
eld her lips tightly together and  
ueezed back her tears.

"We have work for you that we  
st can't do. We have everything  
ady and you are coming with us." They  
grasped her arms, one on each  
de, and guided her out of the bed-  
om, across the dining room, and  
en through the screen door.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

The girls were brave now. The roof  
ad not fallen in. Lightning did not  
rike. "You will see," they said, and  
en were sorry for slipping *see* into  
e conversation.

They eased her down on a blanket  
the grass. The air was warm.  
e had forgotten it was spring.  
e felt the sunshine and even the  
ppled shade. They gently guided  
er hands to a pair of overalls. "The  
ee is gone and Pappa does not  
ave any more decent overalls. We  
ave threaded needles. Here they  
e." They put the fat red pincush-  
on into her hands. "You can cut a  
atch from this old overall that is  
o small for Pappa." They watched  
til her hand found the scissors  
nd then they left her alone.

She measured the worn spot with  
er fingers. She could tell the size of  
e hole even if she could not see it.  
e felt the needle eye and followed  
e thread to the end. They had tied

the knots for her! She could do this. This was easier than the cooking questions, for when asked about potatoes her mind jumped to fire and hot scalding things and danger. Mending was easier than baby questions, too. She had pushed away thoughts of the baby not because it was his fault that she was blind, but because she could not put herself in the position of responsible mother.

She worked on the patch until her tiny stitches had turned in all the rough edges and attached the large patch. She ran her fingers over the mended place and it was good. Wonderfully done! She called out, "Come and see. Come and see." She held her work high in the air and the girls came running across the yard and then she heard them laughing and trying to stop, giggling and then screeching with suppressed laughter.

"And what is so funny?" she asked.

They gasped, "Mama, if we tell  
you, will you laugh, too?"

"I promise," she said.

They took her hand and guided  
it up the well-patched overall leg.  
Across the front and then down the  
other leg. There was no other leg!  
She had used one leg of the overall  
to patch the other. She rolled on the  
blanket and laughed and the girls  
hugged her and laughed with her.

LWT

*LWT columnist Marj Leegard and  
her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit  
Lakes, Minn.*

# How do we get God-like ears?

*Kathie Bender Schwich*



It happened during the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Denver last August—just after the presentation on “Safe Haven for Children.” Several happy, smiling children were gathered on stage to present Bishop H. George Anderson with a special gift. When it came time to leave the stage, the children were led down the stairs to the waiting arms of parents and other familiar adults. That is, all the children except one.

I noticed a small boy head down those stairs and search frantically for the face that was

so familiar to him. He looked and looked, but he could not locate it. He began to cry. He ran around the front of the stage and cried, calling out for that safe and familiar face. He wasn’t embarrassed or intimidated into silence by the business that was going on around him. He was frightened and he felt alone. And he cried.

A few moments later he found whom he was looking for. His cries had been heard. He looked into that loving face. He was embraced with loving arms, and his tears subsided.

I’ve thought a lot about what happened that day. In the innocence of his youth, the boy cried out with no concern for what else was going on in that assembly hall. He had needs for safety and security. He expressed those needs so that another could hear and respond. His needs were addressed.

Adults still have needs, but we have a much harder time expressing them. Unlike the boy, we often are embarrassed or intimidated to silence. Our cries for help remain deep inside; our fear and loneliness often go unaddressed.

### DO NOT BE AFRAID"

Genesis 21 tells the story of Sarah, who is sent off into the desert with her son. As the days pass by and food and water run low, Sarah worries that her son will die. But God sends an angel to her and says, "What is the matter, Sarah? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies here. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation" (Genesis 17:17b-18, New International Version). God heard the cries of Sarah's son. God's ears were sensitive to their needs.

There are people around us every day who feel overwhelmed with the trials and tribulations of life. How do we develop God-like ears to really hear their cries? To see the familiar face and the safe place?

### OD-LIKE EARS

God-like ears listen, and listen carefully. They show interest through facial expression and body language. They never ask, "How are you?" and then walk on without waiting for an answer. When they ask how someone is, they sincerely want to know. God-like ears listen intently to what is said, and to what is not said.

They pay close attention to those segments of conversation that are obviously and intentionally missing. God-like ears listen for body language: the wringing hands, the clenched fists, the drooped shoulders. We can learn a lot about others by how things are said.

God-like ears listen openly and with a nonjudgmental attitude. They are willing to take, in loving and caring ways, whatever words are spoken. They see themselves as God's instruments, allowing the expression of anger and hurt without taking it personally. They also respect the sacredness of what is being shared. They listen with integrity. They present themselves as trustworthy, giving the assurance that what they hear will go no further.

God-like ears listen with discernment. They are able to differentiate when another is in danger and in urgent need of safety, or when what the other needs is the listening ear of one who cares. God-like ears don't always rush in to rescue the other.

And God-like ears listen with Christian love. They listen with a loving presence that says, "You are a child of God. I care about you. I'm here for you." God-like ears listen with a familiar face, a face that offers security and safety. They listen with the face of Jesus. **WT**

*Kathie Bender Schwich, an ELCA pastor, is director of leadership development and training in the ELCA Division for Outreach.*

# What to say?

Kristen Schlauderaff

The Christmas letters were different that year. Several friends wrote of troubled pregnancies and miscarriages. More than usual, deep sadness was shared in those yearly reports of our lives.

I wasn't sure how to respond. With many of our friends, our communication has been reduced to a yearly, mass-produced letter in December. I wanted to express my concern and my own grief for their sorrow. I wrote to a few of them, though it was hard to know what to say at long distance.

It is not much easier from close at hand. The congregation I now serve has been experiencing a bit of a baby boom lately. Along with the births have come a higher number of troubled pregnancies and miscar-



## Our Stories of Miscarriage

*Healing with Words*

riages. As pastor, I am sometimes invited into the sorrow.

We meet not in the hospital but at home, days after the loss. Sometimes the pregnancy had not been made public. It can be easier to say nothing than to announce both the pregnancy and the loss in a single conversation with a friend. Often the grief is private and lonely.

## This life

*This life wasn't meant to be ...  
that's what they'll say  
over and over.  
But wasn't he real?  
Didn't your body change  
and your face glow  
and your heart fill with love*

*for this life?  
Just wait; you'll have another ...  
that's what they'll say  
over and over.  
But this one is gone  
and can't be replaced.  
Each perfect finger*

Even if the pregnancy was brief, the grief over a miscarriage can be lasting. A woman in her 50s once told me she was always a bit depressed in the spring. It took her years to figure out that her depression was related to a miscarriage she had suffered one spring decades before. Now she expects and prepares for those days when she knows she will again remember, grieve, and ponder it all in her heart.

I still wonder what to say, beyond "I'm so sorry." I try not to say too much but to listen to the mind and heart of the other. What is comforting for one is not for another.

These days I have one more thing to say. I bring a book, *Our Stories of Miscarriage: Healing with Words*. Editors Rachel Faldet and Karen Fitton bring together in this book stories of women who have experienced miscarriages and whose healing was helped by writing about the experience. The women wrote their own accounts and stories. Some kept journals that record their days

of sorrow. Some wrote poems. A few men wrote about their own grief as partner and bystander.

I bring the book to friends with the message that "you are not alone." Not every story will be theirs, but they may find their voice in this book. They may also find courage and comfort. Then I tell them to pass it along when they find another who has such a story of loss to tell. **LWT**

*Rev. Kristen Schlauderaff and her husband, Larry Lindmark, serve as co-pastors of Zion Lutheran Church in Deerfield, Ill.*

*Our Stories of Miscarriage: Healing with Words*, edited by Rachel Faldet and Karen Fitton, is published by Fairview Press (ISBN 1-5774-9033-9). Find this book at your local library or bookstore, or call Fairview Press at 800-544-8207.

*as matched by the perfect love  
that you felt.*

*this love was meant to be ...  
remember that  
over and over.*

*Laurie Shepherd  
Jacobson, Minn.*

*Laurie Shepherd wrote this poem after a close friend had a miscarriage. Later, when she herself had a miscarriage, "I remembered my poem and dug deep in a file drawer to locate it. It helped me wade through my own sadness."*

*—Ed.*

# Continuing education, without grades

*Linda Post Bushkofsky*



At the Women of the ELCA Fourth Triennial Convention last year, women (and a few men, too) gathered in a workshop to explore the popularity of book groups. What we uncovered were no great revelations, but a thoughtful list of explanations.

Why are book groups so popular? People, especially Christians, seek community, and book groups can provide community. Since reading itself is solitary, we gather with others to talk about a book so that we get more out of the experience. Book groups help to broaden our own reading lists, and those expanded reading lists help us experience diverse ways of living and thinking.

Reading and discussing books is a form of continuing education, without grades. Book groups can offer a place for self-reflection and personal growth, and they obviously offer social interchange (and often a few good desserts, too).

If you've been thinking about joining or starting a book group, look at that list of benefits. What more motivation do you need?

If you are looking to start a book group, contact Augsburg Fortress at 800-328-4648 to obtain a copy of the booklet, "How to Start a Book Discussion Group in Your Congregation" (order code 56-970106).



## *The Promise of Winter: Quicken the Spirit on Ordinary Days and in Fallow Seasons*

Martin Marty and Micah Marty.  
William B. Eerdmans Publishing  
Company, 1997.

Reviewed by Sue Hildebrand  
Ice Lake, Wis.

Light in the midst of darkness, a  
gulf of comfort, nourishment that  
feeds the soul—one will find all of  
these in *The Promise of Winter* by  
Martin Marty and Micah Marty.  
Forty-seven Psalms accompanied by  
dark winter photographs of still-  
ness set the scene for Martin  
Marty's words of promise.

As we make our pilgrimage  
through life, we encounter "winter  
furies," the author says. As the rage  
of life grows stronger, faith promises  
to last the storms.

This book of beauty—evident in  
the phrases that tug at the heart-  
strings and the pristine images that  
dominate each page—captures one's  
attention as this father-son team  
creates a helpmate for looking  
forward. Everyday experiences bring  
disappointments, pain, sorrow—  
the winter in our lives—yet God's  
promise offers peace, not unlike the  
undisturbed fields of snow. This  
book is a narrative for all seasons!

### **FOR REFLECTION**

What winter "furies" have been  
present in your life, and how has  
God's promise stilled the storm?

2. Observing that this book is not only about "surviving the winter," how do you see the nature of the season strengthening our spiritual journey?
3. Reflect on the storms of our nation. How can we as individuals contribute to a new season with hopefulness?



## *I'm Thinking of You: Spiritual Letters of Hope and Healing*

by Herbert Brokering.  
Augsburg Fortress, 1996.

Reviewed by Thelma Crim  
Osakis, Minn.

Do you appreciate receiving letters?  
Do you feel uplifted when you read  
spiritual, joyful, and consoling mes-  
sages? If your answer is yes, then  
you will want to read this book.

*I'm Thinking of You* contains 60  
letters dedicated to a dear friend  
who is experiencing a journey back  
to health. If you have ever been in  
a hospital, you know how you have  
time to reflect on yourself, your fam-  
ily, or your acquaintances. You have  
time to record sounds, smells,  
visions, words, or times concerning  
the past, the present, or the future.

With his spiritual letters of  
hope and healing, Brokering offers  
insight into one's inner thoughts  
about common experiences such as  
fear, anguish, and panic. Brokering  
shows the reader how a person  
needs comfort, inspiration, love,

and consolation when confronted with illness or surgery.

### FOR REFLECTION

1. Think about your own recovery from an illness or surgery, or maybe the recovery of a friend. How was God present to you and/or your friend during that recovery?
2. What images from nature offer you hope?
3. What kind of ministry of presence might the church offer those who are ill or recovering?



***The Penny Whistle***  
by B. J. Hoff.  
Throndike Press,  
1996

Reviewed by  
Anna M. Sanda  
Williston, N.D.

In the fictional coal-mining town of Skingle Creek, Kentucky, it's the late 1800s and Mister Stuart, the teacher in the town's one-room schoolhouse, has stayed longer than any school teacher before him. Everyone in the town agrees that Stuart is "a different sort."

Eleven-year-old Maggie MacAuley decides that Mister Stuart must be a true gentleman. His smile is gentle, and his speech is gentle. He is gentle with the students, even the slowest, Lester Monk.

Mister Stuart owns a silver flute, and on special occasions he would play it for the children. The music was glorious, and Maggie felt that

it even washed clean the whole coal-mining town.

Then disaster strikes. Someone steals the silver flute. Mister Stuart, already suffering from a heart condition, is devastated. Had one of his students, whom he dearly loves, stolen his flute? If so, why?

What follows is an endearing story about the children's efforts to bring back a smile to their teacher's face. Maggie and her friend, Summer Rankin, come up with a plan.

### FOR REFLECTION

1. Mister Stuart tells Maggie that hope is a gift from God. How has God brought hope to your life? How have you been an instrument of hope to others?
2. How might insights from this book help you on your spiritual journey? **LWT**

**LWT** columnist Linda Post Bushkofsky is associate synod executive for communication and interpretation for Synod of Lakes and Prairies, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She and her husband, Dennis, are members of St. Stephen Lutheran in Bloomington, Minn.

### HAVE A REVIEW TO SHARE?

You can reach "Bookmarks" columnist Linda Post Bushkofsky via email at [linda.post.bushkofsky@pcusa.org](mailto:linda.post.bushkofsky@pcusa.org) or in care of the **LWT** editorial office (see p. 65).

# BULLETIN BOARD

**LWT SUBSCRIPTION CENTER**  
For change of address, subscription  
orders, subscription inquiries  
**800-426-0115, ext. 639**

**Augsburg Fortress, Publishers**  
Box 1816  
Danbury, CT 06813-1816  
[subscriptions@augsburgfortress.org](mailto:subscriptions@augsburgfortress.org)

**LWT EDITORIAL OFFICE**  
**Women of the ELCA**  
8765 W. Higgins Road  
Chicago, IL 60631-4189  
[lwt@elca.org](mailto:lwt@elca.org)  
[www.elca.org/wo/lwt/](http://www.elca.org/wo/lwt/)

**WOMEN OF THE ELCA**  
8765 W. Higgins Road  
Chicago, IL 60631  
[womnelca@elca.org](mailto:womnelca@elca.org)  
[www.elca.org/wo/](http://www.elca.org/wo/)

**Bible study resource orders**  
*Leader Guides, Resource Books,  
Companion Bibles ...*  
800-328-4648

**Permission to reprint articles**  
800-421-0239

**ELCA Braille and Tape Ministry**  
800-426-0115, ext. 502

**LWT promotion items**  
800-426-0115. ext.438

**Women of the ELCA**  
800-638-3522, ext. 2730

**Bible study information and  
comments**  
800-638-3522, ext. 2738

**LWT editorial information  
and comments**  
800-638-3522, ext. 2743

## UBSCRIPTION FORM

*(Group subscriptions may be available through your congregation.)*

Send to: **Lutheran Woman Today Circulation**  
**Augsburg Fortress, Box 1816, Danbury, CT 06813-1816**  
Or call 800-426-0115, ext. 639

NAME \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Amount enclosed: \_\_\_\_\_  regular print \$11.50  big print \$11.50

plus \$6 for addresses outside North America. South Dakota and Washington state residents, please add sales tax.

VISA  MasterCard  American Express  Discover

Credit card exp. date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ (All credit card orders must be signed.)

Subscription rates and frequency subject to change without notice.

# In this issue

## Epiphany devotions

### Intercessory prayer

### Children of Abraham in the classroom together

#BXBHLBU \*3-DIGIT 947  
#008116291#0003 LWT01MR 2A 27  
GRADUATE THEOL UNION 026  
LIBRARY-SERIALS DEPT 201  
2400 RIDGE RD  
BERKELEY CA 94709-1212